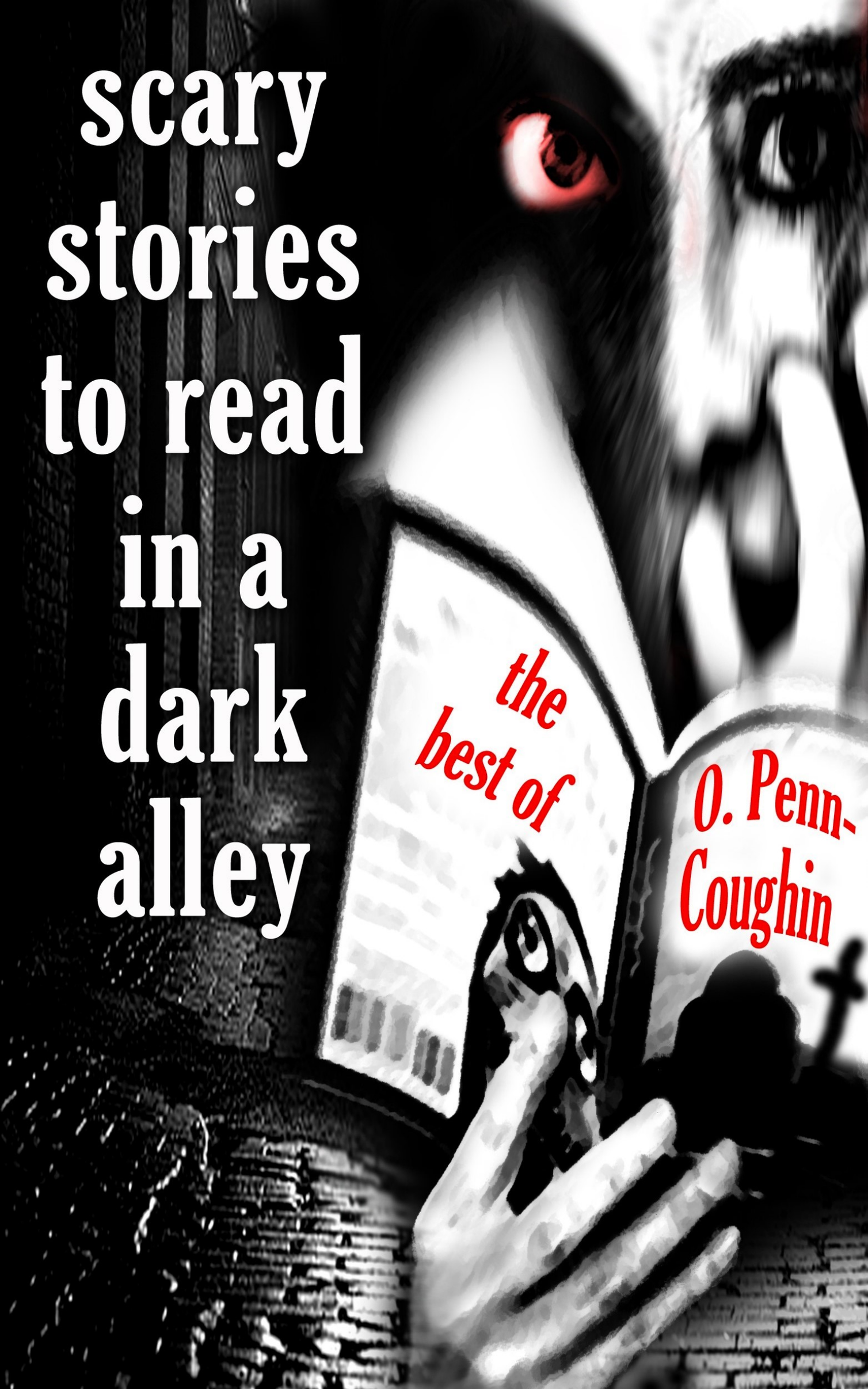
scary stories to read in a dark alley
the best of
O. Penn-Coughin

Scary Stories to Read in a Dark Alley
The Best of O. Penn-Coughin

by

O. Penn-Coughin

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YOU COME TOO Publishing

Introduction

After eight volumes of *They're Coming For You: Scary Stories that Scream to be Read*, the voices in my head—if not my fans—screamed for a "best of" collection. So here it is.

These stories are short and meant to be short. They are also meant to be read out loud. Preferably in a dark alley. **[Instructions are provided where necessary at no extra charge.]**

Oh, and remember to scream like you mean it. And have fun. Because that's what it's all about. Not that hokey pokey business.

O. Penn-Coughin

TOMBSTONE OF CONTENTS

Haunted Places, Scary Faces
Outdoor Ooohs
Evil Clowns
Extra Short Shudders
Sports Screams
Assorted Aaahs!
Outdoor Ooohs, Part Two
Holiday Horrors

Haunted Places, Scary Faces

An evil house, a creepy barn, a tombstone factory, and two haunted hospitals make up this section. Come in and stay awhile.

Sketch
The House
Red Barn
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La Arrugada

Sketch

A monument to madness, the old State Mental Hospital sat on a hill overlooking the small town of Josephson, Oregon. Over the years, a lot of questionable experiments had been performed there. The hospital had been closed for more than 10 years now but, according to some, the screams could still be heard on quiet nights.

It didn't take long after the doors closed for the abandoned asylum to become a popular late-night destination for teenagers looking for a break from the boredom of small-town life. And it didn't take long for stories surrounding the place to sprout like the weeds that covered the dead lawn.

Shadows without explanations. The ghost of a young nurse who had gone down to the basement for some bandages and was never seen again. Bodies buried in unmarked graves in the woods behind the main building rising up at midnight. And, of course, the screaming.

But on this night, Ray and the other three boys were interested in something else.

They climbed the fence and crawled in through one of the many broken windows. Sam led the way since he had the only flashlight. They were headed to Room 202. Room 202 was supposed to be the room of one of the hospital's most infamous patients, Pierre "Sketch" Benoit. He got his nickname from the drawings of victims he left behind at crime scenes. The bodies were never found, just the sketches.

When he was finally caught, Benoit confessed to 27 murders. No one had any reason to doubt him—or that he was completely insane.

The boys sat in a circle. A candle flickered in the middle, throwing their shadows on the walls.

"Pierre, Pierre, appear from thin air," they began. "Benoit, Benoit, where are ya?"

"It's not going to work unless we hold hands," Bob said.

"Perfect," Ray sighed, sticking out his arms. "That's exactly how I wanted to spend my Friday night, holding hands with you losers."

"Pierre, Pierre, appear from thin air," they chanted. "Benoit, Benoit, where are ya?"

"Wait, I think I feel something," Sam said, leaning to his right. A loud noise bounced off the tile floor beneath him and a rotting smell filled the air.

"Sick, man!" Carl said. "Keep it to yourself."

After a good laugh, the boys went back to their chanting.

"Pierre, Pierre, appear from thin air. Benoit, Benoit, where are ya?"

After several minutes it became clear that nothing was going to happen.

"Pierre has left the building," Bob said, sounding disappointed. "I guess we weren't worthy."

Carl blew out the candle and Sam switched on the flashlight. They all stood up and shuffled toward the door, Ray bringing up the rear. Suddenly Sam turned around and pushed Ray back into the middle of the room. Then he slammed the door shut. The sound echoed up and back down the hall. It was as dark as the inside of a coffin in that cell.

From out in the hall, the boys laughed.

"Okay, good one, Sam," Ray said. "Real funny. Now let me out."

Ray pushed on the door and Sam pulled on the handle from his side, but nothing happened. It was stuck.

All four of them tried it.

"One, two, three…"

The door wouldn't budge.

"We'll look around for something to help pry it open," Sam said. "Sit tight."

"Where would I go?" Ray said. He heard the boys go down the hall and then it got quiet.

He could smell the smoke from the candle. *Too bad Bob's got the matches*, he thought.

After a few minutes, his eyes started to adjust to the dark. He could make out the bed and the crumbling ceiling and the door. He walked around and looked at some of the sketches that still covered most of the walls. It was all pretty creepy, but it would take a lot more to scare him. *I ain't some mama's boy*, he thought. Still, Ray wished his friends would hurry.

Then with a squeak, the door slowly swung open.

Ray was about to say something like "it's about time," when he noticed that no one was there. The door had opened by itself. He thought he heard someone whisper his name. Then he felt a chill pass through him.

A few minutes later, the other boys found Ray standing in the hall outside the room.

"Ray?" Carl said. "Is that you?"

"No, it's Pierre," Ray said staring at the light from the flashlight.

"I'm glad you still have a sense of humor about it," Sam said. "How'd you get out of there, man?"

Ray didn't answer.

Sam talked quickly and nervously during the drive back to town. He felt bad about playing that trick. Ray didn't say a word. He just sat there. To Sam it looked like he was far away, deep in thought.

"See you later, Ray-*der*," Sam said when they pulled up in front of Ray's house.

Ray didn't answer. Sam put his hand on his friend's shoulder. Ray turned to face him.

It's almost like he doesn't know who I am, Sam thought.

Ray then got out of the car and walked slowly toward his house.

"Must still be mad," Bob said as he took Ray's place up front.

"Yeah," Carl said from the back seat. "Hard not to be."

Sam wasn't so sure that was it.

Ray unlocked the door and went inside.

"Hey, Ray," his mother said from the living room. "Did you and your pals have a good time?"

He went up the stairs.

"Ray?"

Ray walked into his room without bothering to turn on the light. He sat at his desk and took out a notebook and a pencil. He stared out at the darkness. And then he started sketching Sam's dead face.

The House

Julia hadn't been back to the old house in 10 years. She had never felt comfortable there. It had given her the creeps for as long as she could remember. But as she got older, it became much more serious than that.

There was the scratching coming from inside the wall behind the headboard. There was the breathing man under her bed. There was the corpse of the little girl floating with her in the tub when she would take a bath.

And there was the certain knowledge that the house wanted her dead.

She had promised herself that when she was old enough—if the house let her live that long—she would leave and never come back. And that's exactly what she did when she turned 18.

But after Julia's parents died, she knew she would have to go back. The house belonged to her now. She didn't want it, of course. She immediately decided she would put it up for sale just as soon as she went through it to see if there was anything worth keeping.

She dreaded having to return and face all the old demons and she had put off going back as long as she could. But her lawyer had told her that this was something that couldn't wait any longer.

Her stomach was in an uproar for days before but as soon as Julia pulled up, she sensed that the house had changed. Where before only weeds had grown, colorful flowers now covered the front yard.

When she walked in, sunlight poured in through the large windows. She remembered the house being much, much darker. Always dark. No matter how many curtains were opened and lights turned on. Always dark. And always cold.

But now there was a warm cheeriness to the place that almost made Julia want to reconsider her decision to sell. It didn't seem so bad. It felt happy. It felt like it had never felt before. It felt like home.

Julia walked up the stairs and into her old bedroom. Somehow she was sure that the old ghosts were gone. She could feel their distance somewhere far beyond the horizon. There would be no more scratching in the wall. No more breathing under the bed. No more dead girl floating in the tub.

"Yes," Julia said, amazed at what was coming out of her mouth. "I'm going to live here. This is my home now."

She felt as happy as the day she had left. But all the emotion had drained her. She suddenly felt dead tired.

She pulled back the covers on the bed, half expecting to find a colony of spiders. Instead the sheets spoke of a fire on a cold night, of hot milk and honey. The pillow whispered her name.

Julia crawled into bed.

Everything was so warm and bright. She closed her eyes. It was all perfect. The old fears melted away and peace engulfed her completely.

She wasn't interested in why the house seemed so different. There was no need for questions. No need for answers. She didn't care. Didn't care. Didn't care…

She didn't care that the house had burned to the ground *13 months earlier*.

She didn’t care that the breathing man was waking up—with more than breathing on his mind this time. Didn’t care that the dead little girl had turned evil and was stepping out of the bathtub. She didn’t care that the charred remains of her dead mother were coming up the stairs.

Didn’t care. Didn’t care.

[Yawn.]

Didn’t c—**AAAH!**

Red Barn

There was something wrong with the red barn.

Mary had felt it the first day her family moved into the large house on 10 acres in the country. The barn was the first thing she saw as the moving truck pulled up, and she felt the wrongness of it deep down inside.

It was old and had been left out in the rain too long, mold covering as much of it as the fading, red paint. But it wasn't the exterior that troubled Mary. There was something in its bones that wasn't right, something that could not be explained away as just a bad case of the creeps.

Mary stayed as far away from it as possible.

And then came the winter.

Even in summer the house had been chilly for most of the day, but now it was downright cold around the clock. The old heating system couldn't keep up with the dropping temperature.

"We can't go on like this," Mary's mom said one night in December. "It's freezing in here."

When Mary got home from school the next day, she saw her father swinging an ax in front of a large pile of wood outside the red barn.

"I repaired that old wood stove today," he said as he brought the ax down. "Could use your help stacking this in the barn, Mare."

Mary felt her heart start playing hopscotch inside her chest at the thought of going into the old barn. But she reminded herself that her father was right there, a few feet away. What could happen?

She got some gloves from the house and began picking up pieces of splintered wood. She focused on the work and the sound of the ax outside, trying not to think about where she was.

"This isn't so bad," she told herself as she got into the rhythm of her task.

But every once in a while, it hit her. The dark evil of the place was there, all around her. Waiting. Waiting.

It was cold in the barn, cold enough that she could see her breath, but by the time she finished Mary was hot and sweaty.

She let out a long sigh.

"All done, Dad."

That night the house was nice and warm. Everyone was in a good mood.

Mary was filled with relief at having the wood stacking behind her. There'd be no reason now for her to have to go back inside the barn for a long time, and that made her happy.

But a few nights later, all that changed.

"My back's killing me, Mare," her dad said. "You think you could bring in some wood from the barn?"

Mary shuddered at the thought of going down to that sinister barn at this hour of the night. She slowly pulled on her boots and gloves.

It was cold and clear outside, but Mary didn't look up at the stars. She kept her head down, focusing on the small bit of ground illuminated by her flashlight. She could feel the barn out there, watching and waiting. Waiting for her.

It took all of Mary's courage to open the heavy, wooden door and step inside. It was even colder in the barn than it was outside. Mary's heart beat uncontrollably as she scanned the floor

for the woodpile. When she found it, she put down the flashlight and quickly began picking up pieces.

Suddenly a loud creaking sound came from the wooden loft above her head. Something was up there. Mary wasn't going to stick around to find out what. Cradling a few pieces of wood to her chest, she ran out and up the dirt driveway back to the house.

Breathing hard, she put down the pile of wood near the stove.

"One more trip should do it," her dad said.

The words screamed inside Mary's mind.

ONE MORE TRIP!

"Can't this get us through the night?" she said, almost crying. "It's so creepy out there."

"Oh, Mary, there's nothing to worry about," her mom said. "The night's just playing tricks on you."

"Besides, it's good to face your fears," her dad said. "Get back out there, young lady, and face your fears."

A second later her parents were laughing at something on TV.

Mary went back out and then remembered she had forgotten the flashlight.

"That was stupid," she said, mad at herself and her parents.

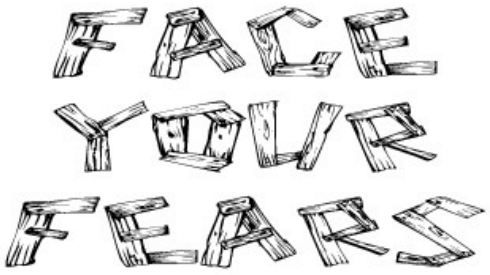
She could see the small light in the barn in the distance. She forced her legs to move quickly down the dark path.

"Face your fears," Mary mouthed as she walked. "Face your fears."

As she reached the barn, the light went out. Mary took a deep, shaky breath and went inside. She felt around on the ground for the flashlight. After several seconds that seemed like minutes, she found it and gave it a shake.

The light flickered back on. But Mary's sigh of relief died in her throat as she looked down at the ground in front of her. Her mouth hung open and her eyes widened with terror.

The once neatly stacked woodpile was now scattered all over the floor. It took Mary a few moments to realize that the pieces were arranged in crude letters. Letters that spelled out…



Then the flashlight went out again and the door slammed shut.

"Have you come to face me, Mary?" a voice whispered in Mary's ear. "Have you come to face your fears?"

It was the voice of the thing she had felt and dreaded all along. It was the voice of the evil that haunted the place. A pure evil that now reached out its fingers for her from the darkest depths of the barn.

Mary stumbled forward and somehow managed to open the door. She ran toward the house screaming.

Behind her the red barn shook with wicked, unspeakable laughter.

Mary ran screaming.

She couldn’t stop screaming.

Field Trip

We stood around the giant tombstone. Nobody was bored and nobody was talking.

Julio knocked me in the side with his elbow.

"This is some strange field trip," he said.

The tombstone was standing upright on a table and a man was holding a hose that blasted sand into the granite slab, engraving it. Julio was right. Mrs. Jones had sure topped herself this time: tombstone artist. Now that's a career.

"It's important to know the different career choices available to you," she had said at the beginning of the semester to our freshman class.

Soon the crazy field trips began. We went to a car dealership and the courthouse. Then to a bank, a bridal store, and an Italian restaurant. Now, at the beginning of spring, we stood in a large warehouse watching how tombstones were made.

The guy with the hose turned it off so our guide could speak.

"This one here is for Mrs. Edwards," he said.

The man had a huge gut and long, gray sideburns that looked freakish and was wearing a dirty blue apron.

"The sand is being blasted out at such a powerful force that it's able to cut through the thick granite. Granite is one of the strongest materials in our world, you know. This is the only way we can cut through it to engrave our product here."

In a few minutes the man had finished.

Edna Edwards
1919-2010
Beloved Wife, Mother, and Grandmother
In Our Hearts Forever
RIP

"Any questions?" asked Blue Apron.

Julio raised his hand.

"How much do these cost?" he asked.

"It's all included in the mortuary package," Blue Apron said, annoyed. "Who else?"

"Do you know how Edna Edwards died?" James asked.

"Well, yes we do, but we're not supposed to tell." Blue Apron said, looking around for our teacher.

Mrs. Jones was standing away from us all, reading something on her phone. He smiled and then whispered.

"Brain cancer. It just ate her brain away. Kind of like little bugs in there," he said, tapping his own skull.

"Okay, well, thank you," said Mrs. Jones. "Students, we need to move along. Tombstones aren't the only thing Michael's Engraving makes. Come on, out the door to the next building. Single file please."

I was last in line, waiting to move but it was taking forever.

Suddenly something touched my shoulder.

“What?” I said out loud, turning and expecting one of my friends. But nobody was there.

There was something breathing in my face. The smell was horrible, like rotting flesh.

“Dude, do you smell that?”

But Julio was way ahead of me and kept on walking, following the line out the door.

“Who’s there?” I asked. I still heard the heavy breathing and then some words.

“Don’t get on the bus.”

It was an old woman’s voice. I couldn’t see her but she was right in front of me. Right there, breathing her foul breath into my face.

“Don’t get on the bus, or you’ll be in here with us!”

“What?” I said. “What are you talking about it?”

And suddenly that putrid smell disappeared. I ran, catching up to the rest of the line.

“That’s a good one,” said Julio after I told him what had happened. We were sitting on a patch of grass outside eating our lunches. The sun felt good and I was glad to be out of that horrible warehouse. Had I imagined it all?

Afterwards, we visited the trophy room and then it was time to leave. I looked back at the tombstone warehouse and that’s when I saw her, standing in a window on the second floor and looking right at me. She was wearing a flowing blue dress, her head full of blackness, blackness where her eyes and mouth should have been. A bony finger waved back and forth.

“Don’t get on the bus, or you’ll be in here with us!” I heard screaming inside my head, over and over again.

I took off running. I heard Mrs. Jones yelling behind me, but it just made me run faster. I couldn’t help it. I ran and ran and ran as I thought about that rotting head full of black holes.

It was starting to get dark by the time I made it up to my front porch.

Mom met me at the door. I knew I’d be in trouble. But there was something more.

“Dave?” she said. She had been crying. Her face was red and swollen. Her eyes were tiny slits, pushed far back into her face.

“Sweetheart? Is that you?” She went up to me nervously and started poking me.

“Of course it’s me,” I said.

I was exhausted. I figured I had probably run at least 10 miles. I was hungry too.

Suddenly, she gave me a crazy hard hug, squeezing me tightly as she cried.

“We were sure you were in the river,” she said. “But you’ve been saved! You’ve been saved!”

The bus had never made it back from the tombstone factory. As it crossed the river, it skidded off the bridge and plunged into the water. There were no survivors.

La Arrugada

Oh, good you are awake, my friend. We were about to start without you. How are you feeling? What are you in here for? What is your name?

You are right, Miguel. My apologies. So many questions. Where are my manners? Dear me, I fear that was another question.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Diego Cervantes. And that over there is Miguel Lavolpe. Miguel, as you can see, broke his leg. The doctor says he will be going home tomorrow. I am here because of, well, it is rather embarrassing. Diarrhea. I ate something that didn't agree with me three days ago and I haven't been able to stop going. I apologize in advance if I should wake you in the night with my noises.

In any case, Miguel and I like to tell stories to pass the time. Perhaps you would like to tell one of your own. Or simply listen.

I will go first.

This is the story of *La Arrugada*, The Wrinkled One.

No, Miguel, it is not about an old woman. Please, no more interruptions.

A very long time ago there was a young nurse who worked at this very hospital. Her name was Beatriz. She was a very good nurse, gentle and caring with her patients. She was the best nurse in the entire hospital. Beatriz did not perform miracles but her patients were the happiest patients in the hospital and many of them did get better, more so than the other nurses' patients.

The other nurses began to get jealous of this. And so they worked out an elaborate scheme to get even. They enlisted the assistance of a doctor at the hospital. He was very handsome.

The nurses started writing love letters to Beatriz from the doctor. With each letter, she became more and more intrigued and at some point fell in love with the doctor. She began writing back. Finally, the doctor asked Beatriz to meet him on the roof one night.

There was a beautiful full moon and it was warm.

¿*Qué*? Yes, Miguel, just like tonight. Now, please, let that be the last interruption.

"Oh, doctor," Beatriz said sweetly. "I love you too."

Suddenly all the nurses came out of the shadows and started laughing. The doctor laughed too.

"Did you enjoy our little joke?" they asked.

"Well, back to work everyone," the head nurse said.

After they all left, Beatriz walked over to the edge of the building. She stared at the street below. It was a long way down. She thought about jumping. She thought about it for a long time. Eventually, however, she stepped back from the abyss and returned to work.

But as the days went by, she became sadder and sadder. She lost interest in everything. Even in her patients. She began to show up to work late with a dirty, smelly, and very wrinkled uniform.

Beatriz was eventually fired. She never recovered from the cruel joke and died soon thereafter.

About a year later, rumors started spreading throughout the hospital that a ghost was roaming the halls late at night.

Some said it was Beatriz looking to take revenge on the other nurses. Others said she was looking for the doctor. Some said she looked and walked like a normal person, while others claimed she floated and glowed with a ghostly malice.

All the stories agreed, however, on two points. Beatriz was no longer gentle and caring. She had become evil, consumed with a burning hatred. And she still wore the terribly wrinkled uniform.

Sometimes an unfortunate patient would make the mistake of interrupting the ghost, this *fantasma*, from her mission. When someone would call out in the night for help, the ghost would sometimes appear. And she would be most displeased.

Patients suddenly started dying in the hospital. Not the ones in critical or grave condition either. The ones in good condition. Patients who had no business dying.

What's that? You are in pain? Oh, that is too bad. *Que lastima*. There is that switch by the side of the bed. Yes, that one. The nurse will soon come with your medication.

Allow me to return to our story. It will perhaps help take your mind off the pain.

Unfortunately, there is not much more to tell. It is just a story after all, but some of the more superstitious insist that the ghost of Beatriz is real and that she returns with the coming of the full moon.

Wait. What was that? Out in the hall. Did you hear it? Did you hear the words?

"Doctor, is it you? *Te quiero, mi amor*. I still love yooooooou…"

It must be her.

[Whisper] *Por el amor de Dios*, do not make a sound. God protect us. She is coming. Our only hope is to pretend we are asleep. It is she, *La Arrugada*. She has answered your call. The door is opening. Do you smell the filthy uniform? Oh, no. Do not look upon her face. It is twisted with hate. Oh, and the wrinkles. The horrible wrinkles.

Save yourselves. Save yoursel—

AAAH!

Outdoor Ooohs

In this section you'll come face to face with the dark side of nature. There are some dead children, a couple of werewolves, a hellish walk in the snow, and one bad *mutha*.

Into the Woods
The Blue Boy
Werewithal
Room for Two More
Yo Mama's Right Here

Into the Woods

For years her dad would look out the kitchen window into the dark forest that was just past their backyard and say the same thing.

"Never, ever, ever go out into those woods alone." He snapped his head around toward Amy and stared at her with those black eyes. "Do you hear me? *Never*."

When she promised that she would never go there, he turned back to the window, lost in thought.

Most years Amy had never even thought about the woods. When she was younger she liked to jump on the trampoline and roller skate down their long driveway. When she was nine she liked to shoot hoops with her friends and go to sleepovers.

But now Amy was 11. She was 11 and she liked to think about things and sometimes be by herself. She really loved to draw and spent her weekends sketching. She was especially good at drawing flowers and trees and couldn't help thinking about all those giant trees in the woods.

One Saturday in April, her dad left Amy alone because he had to visit a sick friend who lived far away. He said he wouldn't be back until late and was gone when she woke up. After lunch she walked to the kitchen window and stared out.

"I'm not afraid of those woods," she said. Soon Amy had her art supplies and stood at the edge of the backyard, looking into the shady forest.

The deeper she went into the woods, the more beautiful the trees became. Eventually, Amy found a large boulder to sit on and started drawing. Time went by fast. Five or six pictures later, she glanced up and noticed the sun had grown hazy and soft and had fallen down low, peeking through only a few trees.

Although her dad wouldn't be back for a few hours, it was time for her to start back home. She packed up her pencils and jumped down from the rock.

As Amy walked through the forest, nothing looked familiar. The trees grew darker, becoming large silhouettes that surrounded her path. She started to worry. Everything looked the same and it felt like she was going in circles. Her mouth dried up and she was getting cold. She started to cry.

Suddenly a little boy came out from behind a tree. He was wearing muddy jeans and a large, dirty T-shirt. His pale face was the only brightness in the entire woods.

"Why are you crying?" he asked.

"I need to get home but I think I'm lost," she said. "Do you know where Stansbury Road is?"

"Take my hand," he said.

Amy took the boy's cold, little hand and they walked together through the dark forest. She had to walk slowly because his legs were so short. But she didn't mind. It was good to have some company.

"Have you been playing out here today?" she asked, remembering his dirty clothes.

"I've been out here all day," he said. "But not playing."

The boy seemed to know where he was going. Soon they saw a light in the distance.

"Yes!" Amy whispered in joy. "We must be close!"

She squeezed his little hand tighter as they walked toward the light. But as they got closer she saw that they had not come upon a house, but rather a bright lantern sitting near a mound of dirt.

There was a dark, sinister figure digging a hole in the ground. They walked up quietly, not getting too close.

“Hey,” she whispered. “What’s going on?”

The little boy was quiet, standing still. She looked at him and saw that his face was even whiter now, brilliantly shining against the darkness like a large harvest moon at midnight. Tears started falling from Amy’s eyes again as the sound of the shovel hit the dirt in an eerie rhythm.

“Where did you bring me?” she asked.

“This is where it killed me,” was all that the boy said before disappearing down into the very ground he was standing on.

Then the lantern went out, leaving Amy alone in the dark woods with it.

[Now SCREAM for your life!]

The Blue Boy

The lake was supposed to be haunted. Over the years, several people had died there under unexplained circumstances. Some had gone mad.

They said the *L*-shaped body of water was cursed by the ghost of a boy who had drowned while ice fishing more than 50 years earlier. It was early spring when the thin ice had cracked under his feet.

They never found the body.

"Where you headed?" the old man at the general store asked.

"Up to the lake," Mano said, signaling with his chin.

"Dead Boy Lake?"

"Yep."

"Wouldn't advise it," the man said, putting the container of worms into a brown paper bag. "It's haunted, haven't ya heard?"

"As long as it's haunted by fish," Mano said.

"I knew him. Back when he was a boy, I mean. Name was Dave. Nice kid. These days they call him *Blue Boy*. Hear he's not so nice anymore."

Mano nodded and took his worms and his change.

"Watch yourself now," the old man said, lighting a cigarette and squinting out the window.

Half an hour later Mano was sitting in his canoe, casting his line into the water. He had the place to himself.

Mano never had a better day. It was as if the trout had been waiting for him all their lives. They went for the worms like flies on molasses, impaling themselves on the hook. Mano wanted to stop—he had more fish than he could eat in a month—but he couldn't. And neither it seemed could the trout.

So there he sat, casting and reeling, casting and reeling, until his ice chest was overflowing with the flapping fish. Then the breeze started to pick up. And then between the sound of his reel and the wind, Mano thought he heard something else.

"*Save soooome for meeee*," a far off voice called.

Mano paid it no mind. He just kept fishing.

Finally, he decided to call it a day. He sadly placed his rod inside the canoe and paddled back to shore. He loaded the back of the SUV with his silver-scaled treasure and secured the boat to the roof. Then he slid in behind the wheel.

"Hell of a day," Mano said.

"*Hell of a day*," a gurgling voice repeated.

The sound was coming from the passenger seat.

The car was suddenly filled with a smell that made the vomit, green and gooey, come up in Mano's throat. He turned slowly. Sitting there was a small boy, his skin wet and pale blue. At first he began to gasp and cough up water, and then a thick black froth bubbled from his mouth.

The boy turned toward him and Mano saw that he had no eyes—just dark empty holes that disappeared into the back of his skull. He smiled at Mano through yellowish-green, rotting teeth.

"*Thanks for saving soooome for meeee*," he murmured.

The *Blue Boy* reached out his arms and pulled Mano in.

"*Now, give me sooome*," he whispered.

Then he kissed Mano on the lips. As his world went blue and black, Mano felt his heart stop. And then he felt nothing.

AAAH!

Werewithal

The bear appeared on the far shore. It stood there, untroubled by the pouring rain, eating from a shrub at the river's edge. Ethan and his dad didn't say a word. They just watched in awe.

Suddenly a motor boat came into view. The roar of the rapids drowned out the noise of its engine. While one man steered the little skiff through the turbulent and rocky waters, the one near the bow stood and raised a rifle. He had the bear in his sights.

"Noooo!" Ethan shouted over the sound of the water.

The bear moved and then a shot rang out. And another. The bear became a blur, disappearing into the thick, wet forest.

The boat made its way over to them.

"How-dee," the helmsman said. "What brings you this way?"

"On vacation," Ethan's dad said.

The rifleman nodded slowly, glaring at Ethan, the weapon still in his hands. The two men looked dirty. It was easy to look dirty out in the wilderness, but this was the kind of dirty that didn't wash off with soap, Ethan thought.

"Well, we'll get the next one, sonny," the shooter said, grinning with white, sharp, perfect teeth. His eyes, though, seemed to glow with a hatred that shot deep into Ethan's soul.

"Don't lose any sleep over dat."

They both gave another half-hearted farewell nod and the boat continued upriver. Ethan and his father stood there in the mud and rain watching it until it disappeared.

"Those guys were kinda creepy," Ethan said. "The rifle seemed to be the least scary thing about them."

"I know what you mean," his dad said. "Well, come on. We have a couple more big rapids to portage around today."

While his dad lifted their green canoe over his head, Ethan shouldered the heavy backpack. He bent down to pick up the paddles. As they walked down the muddy trail, he replayed the incident in his mind. He worried about the next bear the hunters would meet.

***

That night Ethan had a nightmare. In the dream the hunters had turned into werewolves. Shapeshifting werewolves.

***

In the morning Ethan poked his head out the tent. Two loons swam on the foggy lake. Frost covered the ground. But as he stumbled outside, something else caught his eye.

There, right in front of their tent, was a bird head. The severed head of a large bird, maybe a falcon. The sight of it sent a chill down Ethan's spine that had nothing to do with the low temperature.

"Do you think it was those guys?" Ethan asked.

"I don't know what to think," his dad said sounding a little nervous.

"Man, I had a nasty nightmare last night," Ethan said. "And now this."

“I had one too,” his dad said. “What was yours about?”

“Those hunters had turned into—”

“Shapeshifting werewolves?” his dad said, finishing the sentence.

“How could you know that?” Ethan said.

“Because I had the same dream,” his dad answered. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

***

It wasn’t supposed to be the last day of their ten-day Saskatchewan trip, but neither one of them wanted to stay out here one moment longer than necessary, certainly not another night.

They were still about 25 miles away from their car. It would be a long day, but it could be done.

By midafternoon they reached Nipew Lake. The lake took its name, meaning *dead* in Cree, from a smallpox epidemic that swept through the area in the late 1700s. The wind had picked up like it usually did at that time of day. Small whitecaps already blanketed the water. Normally these were the types of conditions that would cause his dad to start looking for a campsite or at least a place to wait it out.

“It’s blowing against us,” his dad said. “But it’s nothing we haven’t done before.”

They both knew that if the wind got strong enough, it could transform a big lake like this into a raging cauldron. An open canoe would have no chance. They would swamp for sure. His dad always made Ethan wear his life vest. This time he did too. They shoved off.

It was always safer to hug the shore when out on a large body of water, but since the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, they paddled down the middle of the lake, sometimes finding themselves almost a mile from the nearest shore.

After a while Ethan turned around to look behind them. In the distant shadows of the forest, he thought he caught a glimpse of a pair of eyes. They glowed in the dark just like the bear hunter’s had. Ethan shuddered with fright and drew in a long, uneven breath like a scared little boy.

The wind began to rage and howl, and at some point Ethan started hearing voices.

“It’s no use,” they said. “No use, little boy, no uuuse…”

Ethan tried to convince himself that it was the wind playing tricks on him. He focused on the job at hand as best he could, but there was true horror in the sound and in his heart.

“No use, little boy, no uuuse…”

Larger and larger waves washed over the bow with increasing frequency, the cold water taking Ethan’s breath away. The canoe—heavy from the water it was taking on—rode lower and lower in the growing waves.

It seemed impossible that they could hold on much longer.

Yet somehow they did. They paddled like this for what seemed like an hour. Finally, the trees and rock shelves on the far shore began to get more defined. Closer. A little closer with every stroke. Relief washed over them and they began to talk again.

“We just might make it,” his dad said. “If you don’t sink us with the weight of all your pee.”

“Have some,” Ethan shouted back as he cupped a handful of water from the bottom of the canoe, flipping it over his shoulder.

A few more short portages and a few more miles on the river and they were at the car.

***

The sun had gone down by the time they made it to their Jeep. The little parking lot was dark and quiet. Ethan's dad put his palm over the hood and bowed his head. Ethan just smiled.

He loaded the gear into the back of the SUV while his father strapped the canoe to the roof. The car rocked as he pulled hard on the lines. They were soon on the dirt road that would take them to the paved road that would take them to civilization.

Ethan began to think about the trip and then stopped. He heard something. The voices were back.

"It's no use," they said again. "No use, little boy, no uuuse—"

Suddenly there was a loud exploding pop and the car jerked to the left. Ethan jumped off the seat. His father pulled the car to the side of the road.

"That was kind of scary, huh?" he said, sighing deeply. "I think we've got a flat."

They got out to look at the damage. It was moonless and hard to see, no end of stars filling the cold sky.

As they got busy digging in the back for a flashlight and the spare and the jack, a car pulled up behind them. It had its lights off.

Two men got out.

Cold, sweaty fingers of fear clutched Ethan's throat. He fought to breathe. It had to be the hunters. They walked toward the Jeep. Through the dark Ethan could make out that they didn't have rifles.

Maybe it's someone else, Ethan thought hopefully. At least it's not a full moon.

And then Ethan saw those eyes again, cutting through the dark, coming closer. The men both smiled, their long, white teeth biting into the darkness.

A moment later they were on top of his father.

"Run, Ethan, run!" was the last thing he heard his dad say.

Terrible screams and inhuman shrieks ripped through the night as Ethan ran through the forest.

Ethan ran and ran and ran until all he could hear was the beating of his own heart pounding in his ears. He finally stopped and stood still for a long time. Tears rolled down his cheeks onto the forest floor. It was now as dark and quiet as death.

Suddenly Ethan heard footsteps coming his way.

"Ethan?" a voice whispered. "Ethan."

It was his father.

"Dad," Ethan said, overcome with emotion. "How did you get away?"

His dad stepped closer and snarled, "I didn't."

It was one of the things.

Ethan took off running again. And again he heard the voices, closing in.

"No use, little boy, no uuuse."

Ethan was more certain at that moment than at any other time in his life. He was sure the voices were right. It was no use.

"No use, little boy, no uuuse…"

He kept running anyway.

[Start breathing hard, pause, breathe some more, and then… SCREAM!]

Room for Two More

Ted and Wendy passed through mile after mile of the most epic winter wonderland. The sky above was a brilliant blue, and the snow was not too soft and not too hard. Even Goldilocks would have said it was just right. The two snowshoers were heading toward a place on the map called *Satan's Lava Flow*.

"This is amazing but, dude, I'm so hungry I would sell my soul for a brownie," Ted said after a few hours.

Just then they saw smoke in the distance. A fire, they both thought. It would be sweet to warm themselves by a fire while they ate lunch. After a few more minutes, they came to a cabin-like shelter.

"According to the map, this isn't supposed to be here," Ted said.

"Well, I'm going in," Wendy said. "You can stay out here and eat your map."

It was dark and smoky inside. Old, rustic benches surrounded a black wood stove. When their eyes adjusted to the darkness, Wendy and Ted saw that they were not alone.

A man sat huddled in the darkest corner of the shelter. A tattered, red wool blanket pulled tightly around his head made it hard to see his face except for his hollow, tired eyes, which looked out in the distance.

Ted said hello but the man didn't answer. The man's presence seriously weirded them out, so they quickly chomped down their lunch and said good-bye. Once again the man didn't answer.

Then just as they were about to leave, he suddenly turned toward them and those dead eyes came to life with an evil, dark glow that illuminated the shelter and threw dark shadows into their souls. He seemed to speak to them without words, and the things he said filled Ted and Wendy with a cold that had nothing to do with the temperature.

They quickly put on their snowshoes and headed back into the woods. Ted turned around once and thought he saw the entire hut glowing with that horrible, dark light. Wendy could have sworn she heard terrible laughter coming from its direction. They quickly crunched through the woods in silence. Ted finally spoke.

"Man, that guy was creepy."

"No duh," Wendy said. "Did you see how he looked at us?"

The short winter day was getting shorter and a storm was moving in. Fortunately the snowshoers saw a sign that told them they were just two miles from their car.

"Almost there," Ted said.

"Almost there," Wendy said.

A dark wind began ripping through the trees, knocking down huge icicles from the branches. The sky was now the color of snow and their legs began to ache.

After an hour they came to another sign. Ted studied the sign through weary eyes and then studied it some more.

"According to this we're still two miles from the parking lot," Ted sighed. "I don't understand it."

He was sure they had made all the right turns at all the right places. A sick feeling gripped his bowels at the next intersection. There, another sign told them they were no closer to the car.

"Okay, someone's playing a joke," Wendy said. "Maybe somebody switched all the signs."

Snow began to fall sideways as Ted pulled the map and compass out of his pack.

“Forget those dumb signs,” he said in a shaky voice. “If we start heading north, we’re bound to reach the parking lot or at least the highway.”

Horror-struck, he saw the compass needle spinning madly. Round and round it went. Ted yelled and threw the compass against a nearby tree. Then, too tired to hold the anger, he dropped to his knees.

Which way was north? Everything looked the same. No landmarks. Just trees in every direction. Wendy wondered how things had turned so bad so fast. The wind was blowing harder now, the snow sticking to the trees like the fear that began to coat their insides. And it was getting cold. Very cold.

“We’ve got to s-s-start moving,” Ted said through chattering teeth. They patted each other on the shoulders the way football players do before a game.

“We can do this,” Ted said.

“We can do this!” Wendy shouted back.

An hour later the sky had disappeared behind the screaming snow and it was getting harder and harder to see. Still, with legs of lead they plowed on.

“I’m tired,” Wendy whispered a few minutes later. “So tired. Wait... Do you smell that?”

It was the strong smell of blackened wood, like a fire after the fire has gone out. Somehow the shelter must be close by, Ted thought. They could get warm and rest and get out of the storm. Through the driving snow, they could barely make out the outline of the wooden structure. The last of their energy gone, they smiled weakly at each other and shuffled toward it. Then they stopped dead in their tracks.

The man was still there. Ted saw those evil eyes, looking past the snow and the darkness, looking into him. And Wendy heard the laughter again. That terrible laughter.

They went inside.

[Laugh your most crazy-sounding laugh while making crazy eyes at your audience.]

Yo Mama's Right Here

The figure rose out of the water. The wet, black dress pressed in on her bony body. The tattered, black bonnet surrounded what had once been a face. Rotting, gray flesh with teeth and bone showing through. Empty, dark holes where the eyes used to be. Her hands reached out blindly for her dead child.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" she moaned. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

With a scream, Jacob Brown woke up from his nightmare.

"Jacob, what's wrong?" his wife Mary asked.

"Bad dream is all," Jacob said, wiping the sweat off his face. "Get back to sleep now."

Tomorrow they would be crossing the Green River. Jacob always had trouble sleeping before crossings. To get an early start in the morning, the wagon train had camped near the river. Jacob could hear the sound of the dark water that was waiting for them.

"I would sooner rastle a bear than tangle with them waters," he thought.

But Jacob knew that if the family was going to get to the green farmlands of Oregon, they were going to have to cross this river. They had crossed others, and there would be more ahead.

He got up, pulled his boots on, and walked down to the river. Dawn still felt hours away. The moon did little to brighten the water or Jacob's troubled mind. After a while he walked back to the wagons.

In the morning a tired Jacob hitched the oxen to the wagon and smiled when he saw his three young children running around. Things were always better in the morning.

"Git on up here, you rascals," he told them. "It's time to go."

In the distance, dark clouds colored the sky. But overhead it was blue as the first wagons began to cross the river.

One behind the other, the heavy wagons moved slowly through the water, each making it safely to the other side. Finally it was their turn.

"Yaw!" Jacob shouted to the oxen. "Do work!"

By now the sky above had turned much darker and the water had begun to rise. The river was moving faster than when the first wagons crossed.

At first Jacob thought it was just his tired mind playing tricks on him. He could barely hear it above the noise of the rushing water.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" it moaned softly. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

Jacob swallowed hard and continued to drive the team. The animals did their best, but to Jacob it felt like giant snails were pulling the wagon. The force of the water made it harder and harder to keep on course. It started to rain.

And then Jacob heard it again. She was closer and louder now, and Jacob had no doubt she was real.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" she called again. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

Through chattering teeth, Jacob urged the team forward.

"Y-y-y-yaw!" he ordered in a shaky voice. "G-g-g-git going!"

The minutes seemed like hours, but through the now-pouring rain Jacob could see the shore ahead getting closer. He almost smiled at the thought that they would make it.

And then it happened. It happened just like in his dream.

Something rose out of the water right in front of the oxen. The wet, black dress pressed in on her bony body. The tattered, black bonnet surrounded what had once been a face. Rotting, gray flesh with teeth and bone showing through. Empty, dark holes where the eyes used to be. Hands reaching out blindly in front of her.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" she moaned loudly. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

Suddenly, as Jacob screamed, the wagon hit a submerged boulder and rose in the air. Then, as Mary and the children screamed, the wagon tipped over. Jacob fell into the water and was carried downriver.

The last thing he saw before disappearing forever under the cold, black water was the woman floating above the wagon.

"Baby, come to meeeeee. Yo mama's ri—"

[Now quickly shout…]

AAAH!

***

Crossing rivers along the Oregon Trail was dangerous. Hundreds of pioneers drowned trying to cross the Kansas, North Platte, and Columbia Rivers—among others. In 1850 alone, 37 people drowned attempting to cross the Green River in Wyoming.

Evil Clowns

Evil clowns. Evil clowns? Is there any other kind?

Van Full of Clowns
Townes the Clown
The Clown from Down Under
Pagliaccio
Rodeo Clowns

Van Full of Clowns

"Clowns!" the shouts rang out. "Run! The clowns are coming!"

Some said the van was white. Others said it was black.

But the stories agreed on one point: evil clowns were on the loose, looking to do who knows what. Up to no good, you could bet your best Carl Yastrzemski card on that.

The sightings first began in the winter of '81.

By early spring, every kid with any sense was spooked out of his mind. Man, even most of the senseless ones were jumpy.

Descriptions were vague. The ones who had been lucky enough to get away had a hard time saying exactly what the clowns looked like.

Were the clowns *real* or just evil doers in circus drag? Was there just one van or a whole fleet of 'em? Questions, rumors, facts, and fear bled together and poured into our dreams.

No matter how much the teacher said so-and-so had moved away, we knew the truth: the clowns had gotten another one. A van full of clowns was seen at the corner of 3rd and Dawson. In the parking lot of Morningwood Park. In front of the school.

The clowns had chased little Jimmy O'Brien down his block. That's why he fell and cracked his skull on the icy sidewalk that day in April. I don't know for a fact if that's how it happened. All I can tell you is Jimmy was never the same after that.

Some of the older kids would joke about it.

"Run! The Clowns are coming!" they'd scream at the younger kids.

"They'll get you and blow you up like a balloon."

"Yeah, they'll twist you into a balloon animal till you explode."

Sometimes they would inflate their empty lunch bags and sneak up behind someone and pop them.

[Clap hands loudly.]

"Clowns got another one!" they would shout.

More than one kid needed to change his underwear after that. They'd run to the office, crying, trying to hold in what had already leaked out.

"Run! The Clowns are coming! Ha, ha, ha, haaa!"

But even the older kids were scared, I think.

The cops said there was nothing to worry about. Just another case of mass hysteria.

Maybe the whole thing was made up by parents trying to get their children to make it home on time, to listen, to behave. The usual stuff. Maybe it was just another variation on the old boogey man stories. Fooled again. Could be.

But I think it was real.

I never actually saw the clowns myself, and I can't prove it, but I know they got me, I mean Mikey, my best friend.

One day walking home from school he saw an old white van pull up in front of his house. Someone got out and ran inside. Mikey was too far away to tell who it was. The van took off down the street.

When Mikey walked in, he found his stepfather. He came out of the bathroom, breathing hard.

"Hey, sport," he said.

His hair was sweaty and pasted to his forehead. He had a few traces of what looked to be white makeup on his face.

Mikey must have gone pale then.

"What's wrong, sport?"

Mikey looked down.

His stepfather was still wearing the big floppy red shoes.

He could tell that Mikey had seen them.

"I'm sorry you had to find out about this, Mikey," he said, coming toward him. "You're a good boy. I'm real sorry."

The shoes closed in. Closer and closer they came.

No one ever saw Mikey again.

Until now…

[Hum some circus music.]

AAAH!

Townes the Clown

Seems like another lifetime ago. This was way back in the days when I had the world by the ba—sorry, I suppose there might be young children present—all right, tail then. I was the king of the rodeo circuit. I had yet to meet a bull that was my equal. I was at the top of my game. My mind was razor sharp and my body was harder than Bulgarian grammar. I had it so goin' on.

I was 23. And the best was yet to come.

And then it all went to hell.

I was too young to be a has been. But that's exactly what I became. It all happened in an instant. And it all started with a clown.

I had never given clowns a second thought. Had no feelings for 'em either way. Never was scared of 'em as a child neither.

But that was before I met *him*.

"Hey, cowboys," the boss said one day. "I want you to meet our new rodeo clown. This here's Townes. Townes the Clown."

He shook my hand and looked into my eyes and I knew at that moment that nothing would ever be the same again. Don't ask me how. I just knew.

He was a big man. Not fat, just big. Tall. Wide shoulders. Big chested.

And the fact that he was so big made the next thing stand out even more and appear even more freakish. You see, Townes the Clown had a small, little baby head. Now, I know babies have big heads. For babies. But you stick the biggest baby head on a big ol' growns man and you've got the makin' of one true freak. And that's how he was. Here he was bigger 'n a football lineman, and with this little bitty head sitting way up high. Little eyes, little ears, little nose, little mouth to match. Freakish.

Without his makeup, he was just plain odd looking. But with it, man, he became someone else. Someone, *something* evil. Pure evil. Even the meanest, craziest bull backed away slowly when it saw that little, evil head.

His makeup was simple. He painted his face white with black circles around the eyes. Then he put a little dab of red on the tip of that little nose. And smeared a lot of it sloppily on his little lips. He topped it off with a little kid's straw hat. And that was it. *Scary city.*

The weird thing—one of 'em anyway—was that no one else seemed to see it. The evil that lived in those eyes, I mean. Everyone took a shine to Townes the Clown. And he became a crowd favorite. I couldn't understand why I was the only one who could see him for what he was.

Right after I met him, I started being thrown by every bull I rode. I was flyin' through the air left and right. I couldn't hold on for the life of me.

Going down in the dirt was new to me. I didn't know how to break my falls, had never learned. I was in shock and did a poor job of protecting myself from the bulls. But every time I went down, *he* was there to rescue me. On more than one occasion, I'm pretty sure he saved my life. Always sending me a creepy, little smile from that creepy, little head.

"Be careful now," he would say in a high-pitched child's voice. "Wouldn't want anything to happen to yoooou."

I tried all fashion of good luck charms and down home remedies, but it was no use. Besides I knew luck had nothing to do with it. It had everything to do with Townes the Clown.

Things went on like this for I don't know how long. Until one day I decided I would do something about it. I didn't know why I hadn't thought of it sooner.

I snuck into his motel room before he got there. I waited under the bed. I heard him come in. I waited quietly. *So quietly.* When he started snoring, I waited some more. My hands were steady. My breathing was even. My heartbeat was slow and measured.

I finally slid out from under the bed and stood up slowly. *So slowly.* After watching him sleep for a while, I went to work.

I took what I had come for. I took my revenge.

Later I stood at the bridge under a full moon, breathing in the freedom. I was free of Townes the Clown. Free. Forever.

I opened up the plastic bag and emptied it over the side. I watched it splash down and bob and float downriver. I stood there for a long time, till it disappeared, bound for Mexico I suppose.

I woke up the next morning and felt like I hadn't felt in a long time. I felt the old confidence return. I had my life back again.

But when I got to the rodeo, Townes was there. He was there as usual with his little head.

Except that I had taken it. I looked down and could still see the blood on my hands to prove it. It had not been a dream. I swear it. Nor had I imagined it. But it was definitely back. Somehow, he had sewed it back on. I could see the sloppy stitching around the neck.

Townes just winked at me and smiled his creepy, little smile from that creepy, little head.

I knew then that I would never be free of him. I knew too that he wouldn't ever let me die. He was having too much fun.

'Course, I tried other things through the years. I killed him on several occasions. But he always came back. I tried runnin' away. But he always found me and brought me back.

Through it all he always kept smiling.

He's smiling still.

[Now smile a creepy, little smile at your audience. After a while scream if you think it's called for.]

The Clown from Down Under

Elmer Rodríguez was one hard, little hombre. He never smiled. Never laughed. Always looking like his dog had just died—and so what if it had, what business was it of yours? I mean little dude was harder than getting up early on Sunday morning.

Elmer wasn't afraid of the teacher or the principal or those crazy *cholos* with the prison tattoos he had to pass every day on his way home. He wasn't even scared of getting beat up by the sixth graders.

There was only one thing the little eight-year-old was afraid of. And that thing came around once a year, every year.

For some reason, Elmer Rodríguez was scared lily white of clowns.

Sure, a lot of kids are scared of clowns. Nothing special in that. But Elmer was different. Clowns swallowed all the oxygen in a room and drained his heart of all its blood. He was so terrified that his family had to stay away from the most popular fast-food joints because of the clowns.

In kindergarten he had even fainted when a clown came out to the school during the yearly fire safety assembly. All the clown had done was smile.

But that's all it took: one look at that ear-to-ear, painted-on smile left Elmer's lungs sucking for air and the room spinning.

It was the same time the following year—although Elmer hadn't learned how calendars worked yet—when the clown reappeared. The little boy took deep breaths. One after another.

The children laughed nervously and the teachers laughed through their bottom teeth the way adults do when something's not really *chistoso*. The laughter echoed through the school as the clown's smile cut into Elmer's soul like a rusty razor.

"*El payaso, no*. Not the clown," Elmer whispered over and over again, squeezing his eyes so tight that fat tears spilled down his bloodless cheeks. *"El payaso, no."*

Speaking of fat, that clown was one *nacho grande*. And he wasn't even a real clown. He was just a fireman dressed up as a clown. Not that anyone would feel safe in case of a fire with this lard-haulin' *panzón* around. Except for the donuts, maybe.

At the next assembly, when he was in the second grade, Elmer could have sworn that the clown looked right at him and mouthed, *"Hola, amigo."*

Elmer could see the clown's crooked yellow teeth smiling at him as its eyes danced like skeletons on *El dia de los muertos*. Those eyes were alive with evil and looking right at Elmer, burning a hole inside him that would always smolder.

As the years went by, Elmer wondered why the fire department would use a clown. What did clowns have to do with safety or fires or anything anyway? What did clowns have to do with anything except fear and evil and scaring poor little kids out of their minds?

When he was in the third grade, Elmer finally made up his mind that he would put an end to it. He stopped at a church before school to ask for help and forgiveness for what he was about to do.

As he got to school, Elmer saw the big red fire truck parked outside, and he knew that this was the day. His calendar skills had improved. When the clown started talking during the assembly, Elmer looked down and played nervously with his backpack.

Suddenly Elmer stood up and shouted, "*No más, payaso.* No more!"

He then pulled something out of the backpack. Holding his breath, Elmer hurled a holy water-filled balloon at the clown and scored a direct hit on the thing's face. Splash!

The principal looked at Elmer's teacher like someone had cut a real nasty one and the teacher reached over and grabbed Elmer hard by the wrist.

"What in…!" the teacher yelled but then stopped when she heard a loud gasp coming from the crowd.

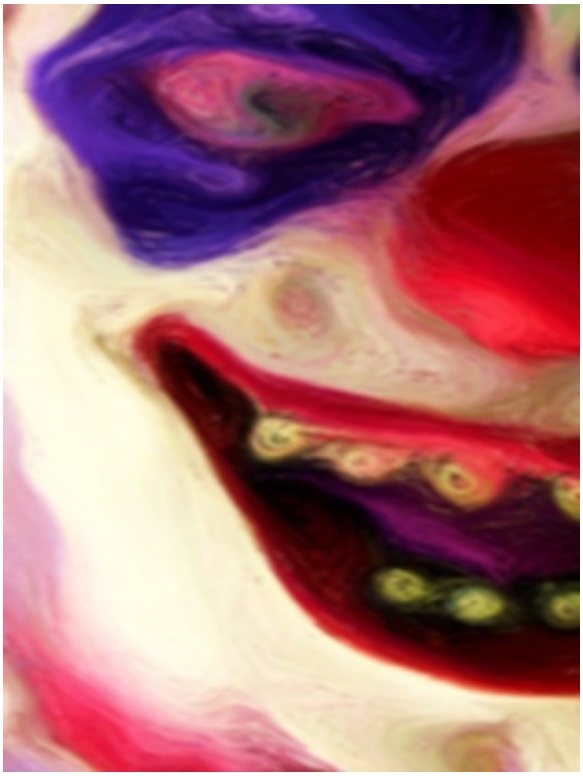
In front of that entire gym full of kids, the clown burst into flames. The other firefighters emptied their extinguishers, but the flames just kept growing until the smell of burning clown filled the air. The make-up, the red plastic hair and red rubber nose, the big floppy shoes, the sweaty, smelly costume, and the thing's flesh all started to blur together.

The clown laughed at first but seemed to lose its sense of humor after the smile melted off its face.

"Orale, pues. All righty then. I'll be waiting for you down there, my little *vato*," it said in a low, threatening voice. "*Te espero, Elmer, eh?* I'll be waiting..."

And then it was gone. A smoking, black stain on the gym floor was all that remained.

No one—including Elmer—was sure what had happened. The only thing Elmer knew was that he never wanted to see that clown again. He promised himself that from then on he would be good. Very, very good. *Muy, muy bueno.*



Pagliaccio

Mario was walking home late one night. He was exhausted. He had worked his day shift followed by his friend's night shift at the mannequin factory. Sixteen straight hours.

"That's the last time I do that," he mumbled. "The last time."

The streets were deserted. It was a clear, cold, and windy night. Mario pulled the hood of his sweatshirt tight around his head. The wind was blowing trash down the alleys and cutting into his face.

He heard a strange, far-off sound. At first Mario thought it was the wind. It had to be. But as he got closer, he realized that it was singing. It was the saddest sound Mario had ever heard. Horrible laughter and heartbreaking sobs mixed in with the Italian words.

"Laugh, clown, at your broken love!

Laugh at the sadness that poisons your heart!"

Mario's route home took him closer and closer to the terrible sound. It had to be coming from a radio or stereo, he thought. But as he turned a corner, Mario saw that he was wrong. There was a man dressed as a clown, sitting on the curb, with his face in his hands. He was singing and laughing and crying all at once. It seemed impossible, but that's what was happening.

A mixture of fear and pity gripped Mario as he slowly walked up to the man.

"What's the matter?" Mario asked, bending over the clown. "Can I do anything to help?"

The clown kept crying into his hands. Mario grabbed the man's shoulder and the clown turned toward him. He dropped his hands from his face and stopped singing.

Mario then saw that the clown had no makeup and no eyes and no nose, just a horrible mouth with thin lips that stretched from ear to ear!

Mario gasped and struggled for air as he stumbled away down the sidewalk. He ran faster than he had ever run in his life. At first he could hear the clown singing again somewhere far behind him.

"Laugh, clown, at your broken love!

Laugh at the sadness that poisons your heart!"

Then all Mario could hear was the beating of his own heart.

After running several blocks, he finally began to slow down. Walking again, he started to catch his breath. He almost began to think that he had imagined the whole thing. But that face, now forever burned into his memory, told him it had been real. It was *too* horrible to imagine.

He started to walk faster. He wasn't far from home, but on this night each block felt like a mile.

And then he saw it. A taxi was parked up ahead. It had its lights on.

"Why not?" Mario said to himself. "I deserve a break."

He slid into the back of the cab and told the driver his address. Mario looked out the window at the buildings going by. He felt better and began to get sleepy. But after a while, he realized something was wrong.

"Hey, you're going the wrong way," Mario said to the driver. "My house is in the opposite direction."

The driver didn't answer. He turned off the meter and kept driving the wrong way.

"Hey!" Mario shouted. "Turn this car a—"

A song came on the radio. The music sounded hauntingly familiar. Then Mario heard the singer's words.

"Laugh, clown, at your broken love!

Laugh at the sadness that poisons your heart!"

Mario put his hands over his ears and began screaming. The last thing he saw was the driver turn toward him.

Somehow, Mario hadn't noticed that he was dressed as a clown. But he now saw—saw too late—that the man's face had no makeup and no eyes and no nose, just thin lips that stretched from ear to ear!

Rodeo Clowns

Waylon and Big Ed were rodeo clowns.

Big Ed was a short fella with a short temper. On accounts of being so little and all, I reckon Big Ed felt he had to be tougher n' meaner than everyone else.

One day he decides for no good reason that he didn't like Waylon. Waylon was a good-natured, gangly cowpoke who towered about two feet over the top of Big Ed's head. But that didn't matter.

"What you lookin' at, big dumb clown?" Big Ed says to Waylon one day.

I don't think Waylon was even looking at him. But that didn't matter. From that moment on, he went after Waylon. At first it was just name callin' and such.

But one day, Big Ed went too far.

Right before the rodeo was set to start, he put something in Waylon's milk. He thought it would be funny to see Waylon stagger around like he was drunk. Especially since Waylon didn't drink.

When Waylon got out there, he was a real mess, wobbly as a newborn calf and trippin' all over hisself.

The crowd was really into it, thinkin' it was part of his act. But some of the older clowns knew it was dangerous. One of them even tried to go out and bring Waylon in, but Big Ed held him back.

"Get back, old timer," Big Ed said. "Don't try to spoil my fun now."

Next thing we know, a bull is charging Waylon.

He never had a chance.

There's nothing sadder 'n a clown funeral. I tell you what. 'Cept maybe a clown funeral in the rain.

The authorities never found any real evidence that Big Ed had done nothing wrong, so Waylon's death went into the books as an accident.

I don't think Big Ed ever felt guilty about it neithers. Wasn't made that way. But he did begin acting kind of peculiar. Started talking to hisself. He would look up and say things like, "Now I know you're not real, so just git!" like he was talkin' to someone.

Then one day about a year after, it was, it's Big Ed's turn to go distract the bull and suddenly his eyes 'bout pop out of his head and he starts pointin' and screamin', "No, Waylon, No! No, Waylon, No!"

There was no one there. But Big Ed saw something just the same. And the bull saw and smelled something too. Fear. He grunted and charged.

Big Ed never even tried to get out of the way. He just stood there looking up and screaming.

"No, Waylon, No! No, Waylon, No!"

The bull's left horn ripped into Big Ed's chest. He lifted him high up in the air. Big Ed didn't even seem to care. He just kept screaming, "No, Waylon, No!"

Big Ed died long before reachin' the hospital.

Things got even stranger when it was discovered that some vandals had desecrated Waylon's grave that night. The soil was all turned over. And then the cemetery caretaker noticed that down in the hole the coffin was all splintered to pieces and the body was gone. What those no good varmints would want the body of a dead clown for I could not say.

All I can tell you is that Waylon was never seen again.

Of course, some of the folks who were there at the rodeo that night think that isn't exactly true.

Some even say you can still hear Big Ed's screams if you listen carefully on nights when the moon is full and the crickets are all chirped out and the midnight train has rolled over them thar hills and the—**AAAH!**

Sports Screams

Two spooky soccer stories, a baseball nightmare, and a story that's a sports story in title only.

Snap
The Head of Teddy Ballgame
The Falcon
The Big Comeback

Snap

There I was, going in all alone with only the keeper to beat, when I got taken down from behind.

"Wow," she said. "And you were so close."

I listened for the whistle, looked around for the ref, certain not only that I would be awarded a penalty kick but that she would earn a red card.

But all I saw was that the ball was still in play with the action going down the other way.

And I saw her.

She hovered over me and smiled an evil smile.

I got up and drove my shoulder into her chest as I ran up the field. She just laughed.

"What was *that*?" I said to the ref. "How was that not a red card, dragged down from behind in the box?"

"First, I don't like your tone," he said. "And second, there was no one around you when you went down."

He must have been blind or paid off was my only thought. But then I looked over at our sideline. No one was arguing. Everything was going along as if nothing had happened.

The hell with it, I thought. *Move past it*.

A few minutes later I found a spot, a safe distance from the last defender, and waved for the ball. One of our midfielders saw me, sending the ball my way. I pushed the pass with the outside of my left foot around the defender and headed in on goal.

I heard the whistle blow. Their goalkeeper didn't even try to stop me. I saw that the linesman had his flag up.

"No way!" I said. "No way was I offside."

"I must admit I can't believe it myself," she said.

She smiled again. Her face was without color, completely pale. Her lips were almost black. If I had been going down a dark alley alone I think I would have found her scary. But I needed to focus.

"You have to be better than the other team," my dad always told me. "And sometimes you have to be better than the referee."

The next time I touched the ball, I made them pay.

I went around three of them, including *Goth Girl*. But then I felt someone grab my hair.

"Not so fast," she said as my head jerked to the side and my eyes filled up with tears.

She yanked me off the ball.

"Hey!" I shouted, but again the ref called nothing.

"I guess he's just letting us play," she said. "And don't you think that's how it oughta be with a game of this magnitude?"

There was a black gleam in her hollow eyes.

"All right, then," I said.

As I trotted by, I thrust my elbow deep into her stomach. Again, she just laughed.

The first half ended without any score.

I finally put one in early in the second half, but it was taken away by another phantom offside call.

"Do you guys buy your white canes at the same place?" I shouted to the ref.

He pulled out a yellow card.

"Not another word," he said.

I had to be careful. This guy was clearly bought off, and I knew he wouldn't hesitate to throw me out. What I couldn't understand was why the coach wasn't backing me up.

The other team scored with about 15 minutes left in the game.

The next ball that came my way found me outnumbered by two defenders. But I went right and then faked left, causing them to run into each other. I drove in on goal alone. The keeper held close to her line. I dribbled in, so that the goal grew huge. I was about to tap the ball into the back of the net when she scissor tackled me from my left. She didn't come anywhere near the ball, which rolled harmlessly away.

"Aaah!" I screamed as I went flying.

"I know," she said. "That's gotta hurt."

She reached down to help me up. That lipstick must have rubbed off because her teeth looked black, too, as she smiled over me.

I looked around for the ref, but I knew by now that there would be no call.

Deep in stoppage time, I had one last chance.

I received the ball with my back toward goal, about 20 yards out. She was on me, but I faked right and spun left, using my elbow to separate myself from her. Then, as I was about to drive my foot into the ball, she punched me in the jaw.

She got just enough of me. The ball beat the keeper but nicked the outside of the post before going out of bounds.

That's how it ended.

As the rest of her team celebrated, she stuck her hand out to shake mine.

"Good game," she said. "Too bad someone had to lose."

She chuckled and held her black smile a moment too long.

That's when I lost it. I mean, really lost it.

I pounced on her with all my might. I kicked and clawed and pulled her hair. I gouged her eyes and bit her ear. She didn't even put up a fight. Through it all, she just kept laughing. They started pulling me off, but not before I got in one more attack. I grabbed her head with both hands and twisted hard. I snapped her neck and heard it pop.

"That'll teach you," I said.

That's the end of the story.

I killed her. I killed her and I would do it again.

It was the championship game, after all. I wasn't going to take any prisoners.

They have me in this padded cell now. I'm wearing a white jacket with long sleeves tied behind me.

I confessed several times, but they keep trying to convince me I didn't kill anyone.

"What are you talking about?" the doctor says. "Who did you kill?"

Number 2, I say.

"I've talked to players, coaches, spectators, and the referee. The other team didn't have a Number 2," he says. "There was no Number 2. You didn't kill anyone. And if you killed someone, where did the body go? All anyone saw was you, alone on the ground, kicking and punching and screaming. Some people thought they heard you laughing, too. They said you were acting odd the entire game."

He even shows me a doctored video to prove it. All trace of her has been removed, of course.

"You know, sometimes people have strange reactions to stress," he says over and over again. "I'd like to help you get better."

He's a liar. I know he's trying to trick me. The lies spill from him. They're all in on it, trying to confuse me, get me to slip up. I'm not sure what their game is. What reason they would have to get to believe I imagined the whole thing? But they don't worry me.

What has me troubled is why I still hear her laughing. I know that would be impossible.

She visits me at night sometimes, too. She stands in the corner and tries to crack her neck back in place. Sometimes the popping sound keeps me up. Her evil smile grows with every failed attempt.

But I know she's not real.

She's not real because she's dead.

I killed her.

I killed her.

I killed her.

I killed her.

I killed her.

I killed her…

All the same, there she is again, smiling in the corner.

Pop.

Crack.

Pop.

Crack.

Pop.

AAAH!

The Head of Teddy Ballgame

Josh, Jon, and John were sitting around the clubhouse playing video games and drinking beer.

"You know when the season's over, we should go on a road trip to the desert and break out Teddy Ballgame," Josh said.

"Well, the way we've been pitching that should be sooner rather than later," Jon said. "I doubt we'll make the playoffs."

Outside the crowd booed as the team lost yet another game.

"Pass me that bucket of chicken," John said, belching.

Jon was right. The team blew a nine-game lead in the final month of the season and failed to qualify for the postseason.

A week after the season ended, the three pitchers were far away from sad, chilly Boston, playing round after round of golf under the Arizona sun and sitting around the pool.

"You ready for tomorrow night?" Jon said. "The security guard will be expecting us."

"I reckon so," Josh said. "How much is this going to cost us anyway?"

"A couple of tickets behind the first base dugout to a game next season and an all-expenses weekend trip to Beantown."

"This one's on me," John said, smiling. "After all, I made 16.5 million dead presidents last year."

"You pitch like a dead president," Josh said. "Hey, wasn't your ERA 16.5?"

"Takes one to know one," John said. "Anyway, I'll be that one you see crying… all the way to the bank."

"All right, all right," Jon said. "Tomorrow night we set Teddy Ballgame free."

Teddy Ballgame had been one of the most famous players in team history and one of the greatest hitters in the history of baseball. When he died his family had his head frozen in hopes that he could be brought back to life one day. But according to his oldest daughter, this went against his wishes. She said Teddy Ballgame just wanted to be cremated and his ashes scattered at sea.

"I'm playing an old video loop for the cameras," the security guard said. "But after 10 minutes I've got to go back to the live feed, so set your watches and don't be late. Oh, and you're looking for the container marked *A-1949*. *A-1949*. Got it?"

"*A-1949*. Got it," Jon said. "Thanks, buddy."

"It's wicked cold in *hee-ah*," Josh said a minute later. "Wait a minute. Why am I talking that way? I'm from Texas."

The three looked around the room. There were a few large containers that housed whole bodies. Mostly, though, it was heads. There seemed to be more than 100 corpses in all.

"Why just the heads?" John asked.

"This stuff is expensive," Jon said. "I guess most of these folks figured they'd freeze their most important part—their brains."

"I guess they won't be preserving *your* brain," Josh said, turning toward John. "Or your right arm."

“Shut up,” John said.

“Man, that’s so wrong,” Josh said. “They’ve got his head in a lobster pot.”

John started laughing.

“Keep it down, you idiots,” Jon said.

“Look,” Josh said a few minutes later. “Here it is.”

They removed the lid from the silver canister.

John stared down at the head.

“Are you sure that’s him,” he said. “That doesn’t look like Teddy Ballgame.”

“It’s the number the guard gave us,” Jon said.

“Well, he has been dead for a while now,” Josh said. “Plus he’s frozen. I’d expect he would look a little different.”

“All right,” Jon said. “Josh, you hold the container and I’ll lift him out. John, you hold open the bowling ball bag.”

“Okay, but move it along,” John said. “We’re running out of time.”

Jon lifted the head carefully out of the container.

“We’re here to take you home, Teddy,” Josh whispered.

Suddenly the head flew out of Jon’s hands. It floated and hovered in midair and slowly opened its eyes.

“I’m not going anywhere,” the head said.

“But we came to rescue y-y-y-you,” Jon said.

“There’s nothing I’d like more than to feel myself drifting down to the Caribbean on those warm waters,” the head of Teddy Ballgame said. “But what you boys did wasn’t right. Somewhere along the line you stopped caring. You stopped caring about the game. And from where I float, that’s a mortal sin.”

“This is nuts!” John shouting, his eyes bulging like cheeky wads of tobacco.

“I’m not the only Sox fan in here either,” the head said. “We’re gonna teach you a lesson you won’t soon forget. Get ‘em, boys.”

The lids popped off a few of the other containers. Before they knew what was happening, the three ballplayers were surrounded by several frozen bodies and floating, angry heads.

“No!” Josh screamed. “Nooo!”

“This can’t be happening,” Jon yelled.

“We’re sorry,” John whimpered, a puddle spreading down at his feet. “We’re so sorry.”

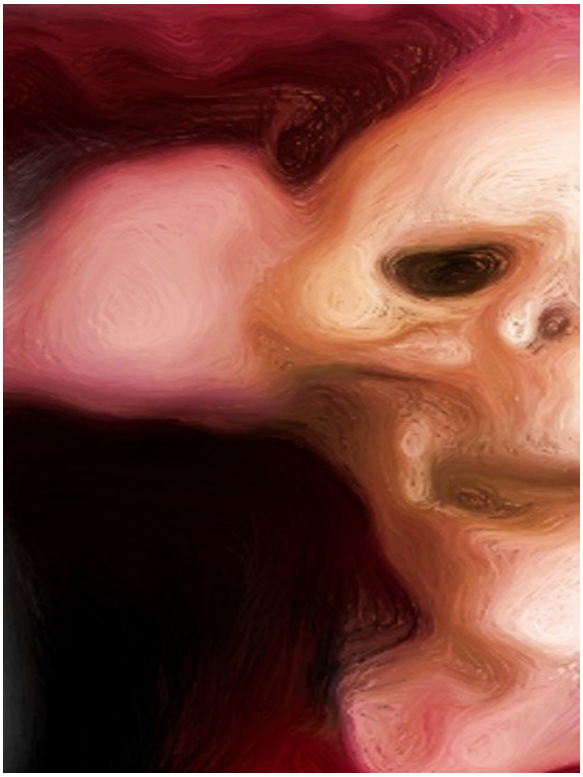
A few minutes later they found themselves inside one of the large canisters. The frozen liquid nitrogen closed in all around.

They were colder than any of them had ever been in their entire lives. John’s lips turned purple. Josh’s eyeballs froze. Jon’s brain cracked and popped.

“Three hundred and twenty-one degrees below zero is no laughing matter,” the head of Teddy Ballgame said, chuckling. “Oh, wait, maybe it is.”

“Hahahahahahahahaa,” the other frozen bodies and angry heads laughed. “Ahahahahahahahaa!”

“Maybe it is.”



The Falcon

Carlos Deulofeu was one of the fastest players in the history of Argentine soccer. His nickname was *El Halcón*—the falcon—the fastest of all animals, almost three times faster than a cheetah. When he was in his prime, opponents claimed that all they saw was a blur when Deulofeu flew past them.

But lately Deulofeu had lost a step or two. He never had great ball skills—never needed them. And now, with his legendary speed all but gone, he was rapidly becoming just another player.

It hurt to hear the fans chant their insults.

Old age burns and stings.
El halcón now sits in his birdcage and of yesterday sings.
Halcón, halcón, they have cut off your wings.

But what troubled Deulofeu even more was the fear that the coach was going replace him. He always knew he would have to retire one day. He just wasn't ready for that day to come so soon.

"I would do anything for one more season in the sun," he said, icing down his aching knee after another bad game. "Hell, I would do anything for one more game."

"If you are serious about doing anything," Gaston, the trainer, whispered, "I know someone who might be able to help you."

"I am," Deulofeu said.

The next night the trainer took Deulofeu to meet an old man.

"You must do whatever this *brujo* says," Gaston said. "He is a witch with great powers. I have told him of your situation and he has prepared a cure."

"*Esta bien*," Deulofeu said. "I will do it."

The old man didn't look like he had any special powers. He just looked like an old man.

There was a strange smell in the dark little room.

The *brujo* signaled for Deulofeu to sit down at a small table. Then he left the room and came back with a bowl. He placed it down in front of Deulofeu.

"Eat all of this," he said. "Leave only the bones, *solo los huesos*."

Deulofeu realized that this soup had been the cause of the odd smell.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Eat," was all the old man said.

Deulofeu pulled the tender meat off the tiny bones and chewed on it, slurping up the clear broth.

"I've had worse," he said when he was finished.

"You will now be fast again. But only three times each day. *No más*," the brujo said. "This thing is most important."

"Yeah, okay," Deulofeu said. "What was that I just ate?"

"The feet of a newborn," the old man said.

"A newborn what?"

"A human child."

"You must be joking," Deulofeu said, seeing that the old man did not seem to be joking.

El Halcón spent the entire night throwing up and in the morning he didn't feel any faster.

"You'll pay for this," he said, shaking his fist at the trainer. "That *brujería* of yours was a waste of time."

"*Paciencia*," Gaston said. "Patience."

The first time it happened, Deulofeu wasn't even fully aware.

It didn't feel like he was going that fast. But he effortlessly blew by defenders a couple of times during practice. He couldn't remember the last time that had happened.

"What do you know?" he said, smiling.

He couldn't remember the last time he had done that either.

During the game Sunday, Deulofeu used his new power twice during the first half. The first time he ran too fast. He outran the ball, failing to push it hard enough out in front of him. But the second time was different.

He took the ball with him, blazing like a comet across the field. He was faster than he had ever been.

"¡Halcón! ¡Halcón!" the crowd shouted when he scored.

In the second half he repeated the move, but he was too fast for the linesman's eyes. He called him offside.

With less than a minute to go, the game was still tied 1-1.

A teammate stole the ball and passed it to Deulofeu in the dying seconds.

"¡Halcón! ¡Halcón!" the crowd cheered.

"Again!" Deulofeu called down to his legs. "Again!"

He tore through the other team's defense like it was tissue paper. There was only the goalkeeper to beat and he guessed wrong. Deulofeu's feet softly cradled the ball like a baby into the back of the empty net.

The stadium erupted in hysteria.

Goal! *¡Goooooooool!*

As the other players ran toward him to celebrate, Deulofeu felt strange. There was something wrong with his feet.

"*Mis pobres pies*," he shouted. "My poor feet!"

Deulofeu exploded past them toward the locker room. In all the cheering, they didn't hear his screams.

It wasn't until they reached the locker room that they heard him.

The screams were coming from the shower.

"*Mis pobres pies*," he yelled. "My poor feet!"

They rushed toward him, a sick burning smell hitting their nostrils when they reached the shower room.

"*Mis pobres pies*," the screams echoed. "My poor feet!"

The water was still on, but Deulofeu wasn't there.

All they found was a pile of wet ashes on the tiles near one of the drains.

The screams were still bouncing off the walls.

"*Mis pobres pies*. My poor feet!"

Carlos Deulofeu was never seen again.

The Big Comeback

I had to come back.

I couldn't let her crime go unpunished.

I think that's why I *woke* up.

I woke up in the dark. It took a while for my senses to return. There didn't seem to be any oxygen in the small box. At first I began to panic. And then I realized I didn't need to breathe anymore. My lungs were just so much stuffing now. My heart was in pieces. A million pieces. She had seen to that. Good thing I didn't need it anymore either.

I began to push up on the lid. It took a long time, but I finally heard the wood crack. And then the dirt poured in. The dirt was easier to go through, but there was more of it. But I had time. Lots of time.

I made it to the surface as the sun was coming up. The caretaker screamed and ran off when he saw me.

I walked down the street. The few people out at that hour crossed to the opposite sidewalk when they saw me coming.

I walked and walked and walked. I stuck to alleys and side streets when possible. I stumbled and staggered and slowed near the end. Not from fatigue but from decay. But as the first star came out, I turned on to her street.

"I'm coming, Julia," I whispered.

What was left of my brain, my brain, my brain choked its grip around how she had told me she couldn't love me. She had laughed at me.

"Not if you were the last creep on earth," she had said.

That's when I began to die.

"Creep's coming, Julia," I hissed as a wobbled up her driveway.

I pushed the doorbell and my finger fell off.

She answered the door. Then took a step back.

I reached for her and keeled over.

She gasped and tried to scream but her heart had stopped.

She crumbled down on top of me.

"Who's creepy now?" I sighed, as I stroked her hair. "Who's creepy and dead like me?"

Extra Short Shudders

Some of these are so short in fact, the titles are pretty much the longest part…

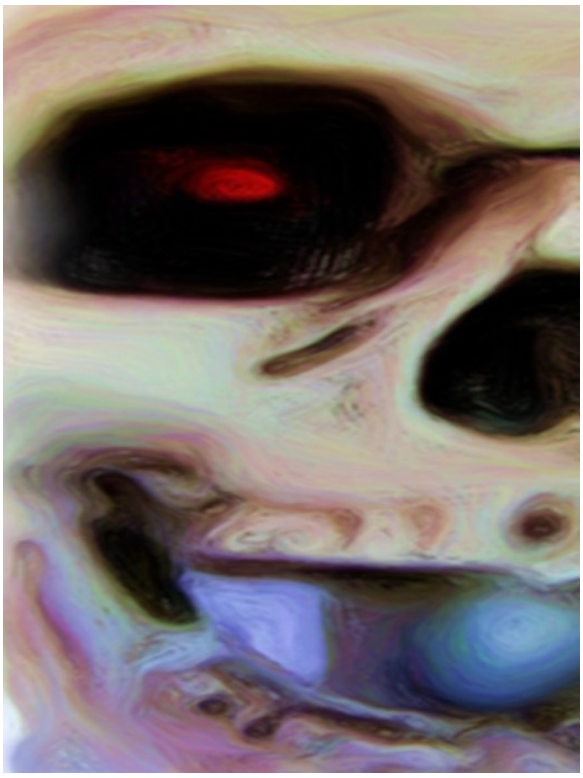
Won't Get Ghouled Again
The Marshmallows Started Screaming
Bloody World
The Old Graveyard
Teddy
What's His Name
Ruth and Johnny, Again
Run
Staring at the Sun
Under
Shell Shock

Won't Get Ghouled Again

Aaaaaaaaaaaah!!!

The Marshmallows Started Screaming

The marshmallows started screaming.
Wouldn't you?
AAAH!



Bloody World

The eye in the blender was looking back at me. And then I realized I was the one in the blender looking out at the whir… at the whir… at the whir… at the *whirl*… at the *whirl*… at the *whirl*… going by… going by… going *bye*…

The Old Graveyard

The old graveyard is a scary place at night.

No matter how hard the wind blows, it can't blow away the sad truth and the rotting smell of endless nothingness.

In the morning, the dead flowers are scattered hither and dither, but the coffins are still there, down in the ground. Leaking. The skin and the bones and the worms, getting wet.

The dead in the dark, wishing and waiting, hoping there is some truth to those zombie movies. Dreaming of the sun. Wondering what brains taste like.

The old graveyard is a scary place at night.

Especially if you're dead.

The old graveyard is a scary place at night. And it's always night, when you're dead.

Dead.

Dead.

Dead.

Teddy

His name was Teddy.
I saw him at the park.
He seemed like just another kid.
We played on the see-saw.
We went down the slide.
We played hide and seek
with my head.
How was I to know Teddy
had just escaped from a mental hospital.

What's His Name

Your fingernails claw too late through the dirt,
The worms just ate your liver for dessert.
You stumble around looking for your head.
You find Smith instead,
Who's also quite dead.
Your brain dismembered,
You can't remember
His first name was Ned.

Ruth and Johnny, Again

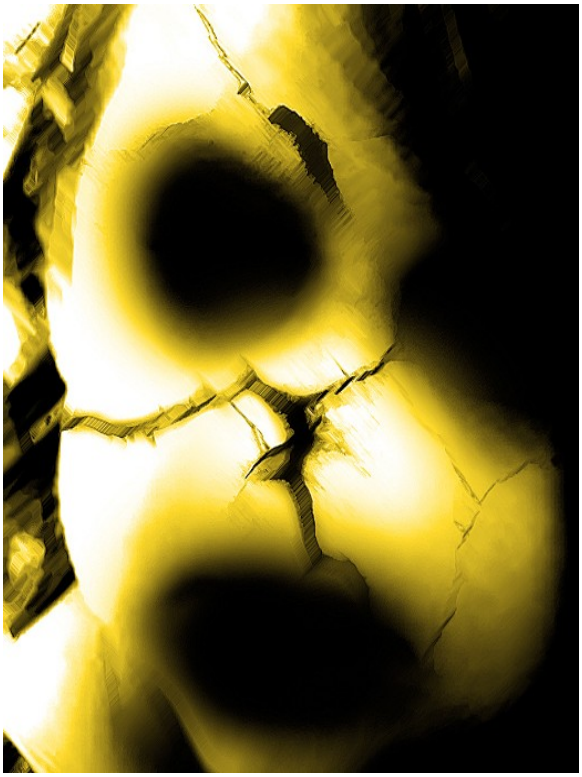
Ruth and Johnny went car camping.
The sun went down.
Ruth heard a noise.
Johnny said, “I think it’s a clown.”
Ruth said, “Or it could be a bear.”
John drove the hell out of there.

Run

First her left ear turned black.
Then it fell off.
Then the same thing happened to her nose.
Then she came looking for you.

Staring at the Sun

“Don’t stare at the sun,” the woman said.
“Why not, Mommie?” the little boy said.
“Because your eyes will catch fire,” she answered.
“You mean like this, Mommie?” he said.
She turned to look at her young son.
His eyes ran like lava down his cheeks.
“Yes, like that,” she said. “Just like that.”



Under

There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks.

There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks when you're under the knife.

There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks when you've come to the end of your life.

There's something wrong with the way your leg looks, all green and leaking pus.

There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks when they throw you under the bus.

There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks.

It's not my fave.

There's something wrong with the way the word *under* cooks when your brain's in the microwave.

AAAH!

Shell Shock

"What's that?" Sally said.

"Probably just the icemaker," Brittney said. "It's been running a little loud lately."

Sally walked to the refrigerator. Another explosion rocked the kitchen. She opened the freezer.

"There aren't even any cubes in here," she said.

The next jolt almost knocked her down.

"It seems to be coming from down in the main compartment."

"Wait for me," Brittney said.

She rushed to the kitchen.

Sally opened the refrigerator door.

There were cracked egg shells everywhere. And there were things inside, live things, horrible things, things that weren't baby chicks, things that didn't resemble anything they had ever seen… things that came after them.

Things that cracked some skulls and made an omelet out of Sally's and Brittney's brains.

Assorted Aaah!

These stories didn't easily find a home in the other sections. Something about not playing well with others. Possession, insanity, angry ghosts, murderers, vampires, old babies, and three little pigs can all be found here.

The Diary of Flem Smith
Bandoneón
Hold the Pepperoni, for We are Many
Waiting for the Bus
Cookies
Open Window
Bad Memory
El Sediento
Old Relic Head

The Diary of Flem Smith

6 September, 1620… Our ship, the *Mayflower*, has set sail for America. It will be a long voyage. I do not understand why we had to leave Holland. I was born in England, but Holland is the only home I can remember. I miss Femke, my best friend. Father says the Dutch are not like us. I do not understand why that is a bad thing.

17 September… I have not vomited for two days.

22 September… A strange man from Holland is on the ship. His name is Jan Boemann. He only speaks a few words of English. He is very thin and tall. He dresses in black from head to toe except for the large white ruff around his neck. This collar is so ghastly and white, it hurts the eyes. Stranger still is that no one has seen Jan Boemann in more than a week.

30 September… People say now that Jan Boemann must have fallen overboard.

4 October… It is always night and loud down here. The wind and the waves and the coughing and the vomiting and the other body noises fill the foul air. The darkness hides the bugs in the biscuits. Nothing hides the smells. Such wretched smells.

9 October… A most heinous sailor has died. He would say awful things. Father says he was no better than the lice and fleas that crawl over our heads and bodies. Still, I am filled with sorrow at his passing.

11 October… The storms have been bad. Our tiny ship is tossed about on this great ocean. We are taking on water and there is talk we may have to turn back. I fear we may sink to the bottom of the sea.

14 October… The *Mayflower* has been repaired. The captain is confident we will reach America.

16 October… It was my turn again to go on deck and empty the bucket. It takes all of my concentration to keep the vile thing upright as the ship rocks from side to side.

19 October… One of the men fell into the sea during a storm, perhaps like Jan Boemann, but he managed to hold on to ropes and was pulled up to safety.

6 November… A servant boy died today. He is the second. Somehow, I do not think he will be the last.

9 November… Land! Land ahoy! We have reached America.

27 November… The men have been searching the coast for a place to build our new home. They have seen savages in this wild land. I wonder what new and strange animals we will encounter as well.

4 December… It is hard to see land so close and to have to stay aboard this miserable ship. Oh, to walk in those woods would be such a thing. I am not afraid of the cold or the savages. If only I knew how to swim. If only the waters were not freezing. I would do it. I would.

22 December… The men have finally found the spot. They will build the town by day and return to the ship at night. The icy sky screams with wind and snow.

29 December… John Poundstone returned today with a strange story. In the distant trees he saw a thin, tall man dressed all in black. It was Boemann, he said. It could not be. But it was. As John approached, he saw that the large ruff around his neck was now dark red in color. His eyes were also red and his teeth and fingers had grown long and pointy. Father says it is the fever talking.

1 January, 1621… John Poundstone died today. His last words: “The Boemann is coming for me.”

3 January… The snow falls silently on the dark water. December took with it six souls. The new year already two. They bury the bodies on the hill.

15 January… We are finally on dry land and off that terrible ship. We all live together in a common house. It is no bigger than the *Mayflower*, but we are on dry land. Finally, dry land. I thought I would be happier and, yet, I am troubled. I sense a darkness I cannot explain. A darkness blacker than night.

19 January… The story of Boemann will not die. It is said now he is here with us. Some of the older children have taken to singing a song: “If the scurvy or the cold do not take you, The Boemann will.”

23 January… Little Jonas Gutkind’s screams filled the night. “No, don’t let The Boemann take me!” It was plain to see there was no one there. But Jonas saw him just the same. His little eyes still bulged with terror after he was cold and dead.

February 28… No one is singing anymore. Fully one quarter are dead. Many more will surely follow. It is cold here. So cold.

7 March… Terrible storms with no end. The world is white and The Boemann is real. I swear it. I saw his eyes last night in the dark. I was too weak from coughing to scream. I shake from fever and see him in my sleep still.

15 March… I saw The Boemann again last night. His long fingers stretched out for me. He smiled at me with his long, sharp teeth. And then he whispered in my ear, “Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Do not be a… **AAAH!**”

Almost half of the 102 passengers on the Mayflower died during that first winter in America. They died of cold, hunger, and disease. It is not known how many were taken by The Boemann.

Bandoneón

The call came in on the shortwave radio and confirmed their worst fear: the storm that had lasted for six days would now maroon them here for much longer.

Dr. Mary St. Clair and Dr. Paul St. Clair had been packed and all ready to go. But the husband and wife science team would be going nowhere. It was now too dangerous for a plane to come for them until the spring. They would be spending the entire winter in Antarctica.

Just last week the planes had come and gone, flying tons of gear and hundreds of people back to civilization. Back to the sun.

"Well, at least we've got plenty of food and fuel," Paul said. "And the flat screen and all those DVDs should help pass some of the time."

"Too bad our books and my sheet music were already shipped out," Mary said. "But this might give me a chance to write my own tangos."

Paul had bought her a small hand-held accordion called a *bandoneón* in Argentina on their last stop before flying down to their South Pole home. He thought learning how to play a new instrument would help to fill the long Antarctic hours. Mary had become a pretty good player in the five months they had been at the ice station.

"Maybe you can teach me how to dance," Paul said, trying to sound optimistic. "Plus maybe I'll write that novel I'm always talking about."

At first the couple made the best of the situation. They watched movies, Mary played her music, and Paul wrote.

But in under a month the TV broke and Paul developed writer's block.

Mary kept playing though. She had even written a tango she called "Pablo's Peace."

Paul liked it at first and was touched that Mary would name her first composition in his honor.

But as the weeks went by, Mary became more and more obsessed with the song. Soon it was all she would play.

Through the endless dark days and dark nights that bled into one another, *Pablo's Peace* began to wear on Paul.

"Mary, could you please play something else?" he would ask and then beg and then scream. "Please, Mary. For the love of God. *Please*."

But the answer was always the same.

"I'm almost finished with it, dear. It'll be worth it."

Mary stopped cooking and bathing and sleeping. Her entire existence revolved around *Pablo's Peace*.

"For the love of God, Mary. Please stop, please," Paul would say. "Please."

"I'm almost finished with it, dear," she would answer. "It'll be worth it."

***

When the other scientists returned to the ice station in the spring they found Paul first.

He had killed himself with an axe.

Then they found Mary. In the freezer. She had been hacked to pieces and neatly wrapped and stored.

They also found a note.

I know you won't understand, but I had to do it. She drove me mad. With that song. That infernal song. The funny thing is that I can hear it still. Even though I made her stop yesterday. Or was it last week? It doesn't matter. I made her stop. That's the point. Or if you're going to nitpick, all right, the axe made her stop. But I helped. And when we were through with dear, dear Mary—the axe and I—we made that bandoneón stop. Oh, we made it stop. That damned bandoneón will never play another note again. We saw to that. God will understand. He knows about such things.

Dr. Paul St. Clair

"Man, that poor bastard really went nuts out here," the detective called in to investigate the case said. "But I guess music will get on your nerves that way I suppose."

"To my way of thinking that's a scientific fact," the ice station manager said. "And you could almost understand where he was coming from, except for one small detail."

"What's that?" the detective said.

"Along with the rest of their personal belongings, that accordion he writes about was flown out on the last plane that left here back in March—*five months ago*."

Hold the Pepperoni,
for We are Many

The two boys had been fishing at Devil's Lake all day without anything to show for it.

"Let's try that spot under those cliffs," Matthew said. "Fish like the shade."

"It's worth a shot," Luke said, sighing deeply as he started the boat motor.

A few minutes later they had their lines in the dark water. Half an hour went by. The fish were just not cooperating.

Suddenly there was a thunderous rumbling from the cliffs. It sounded like lightning or a stampede of buffalo. Moments later a huge cloud of dust rose in the sky. The boys put down their poles and looked up. And then they saw it.

An animal flew off the edge of the cliff. It was at least 100 feet down to the water. The animal dropped awkwardly through the air.

"Look!" Matthew said, pointing.

More followed. In an instant the sky was full. There were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them.

"They're pigs," Luke said, not believing what he was seeing. "Pigs!"

The pigs started hitting the water with incredible thuds. Great sprays of water shot in the air. The majority of the animals splashed down near the shore, but some of them landed just a few feet away from the boat.

"This is insane," Matthew said. "What could have gotten into them?"

"Let's see how many we can rescue," Luke said.

He motored over to a group of three pigs that were swimming toward them.

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"Look, there's a boat coming toward us," the blue-eyed pig said. "Act helpless when they get closer."

"I've got the one in the back," the second pig said.

"I'll take the other one," the first pig said.

"Hey, what about me?" the third pig said. "I didn't survive that fall for you two to leave me here in this Satan-forsaken lake."

"Don't worry," the second one said. "There's plenty of room inside that chubby kid for both of us."

***

It took a great effort, but the boys managed to pull the pigs on board. With the extra weight, the boat now sat low in the water.

"Man, that was work right there," Matthew said, breathing hard. "But they seem to be in pretty good shape."

"Yeah," Luke said, wiping the sweat off his face. "Hey, look at the way that one is staring at you. I think it's in love."

"Yo mama's in lo—" Matthew began to say and then stopped.

He felt strange. He wasn't himself anymore. Then he felt nothing. His brown eyes turned blue.

"What's the matter?" Luke said.

Matthew didn't answer.

A moment later something took control of Luke. Something evil. No, it wasn't one thing. It was two.

The boys threw the pigs back in the water, smiled at each other fiendishly, and headed back to town.

Waiting for the Bus

James was alone in his hotel room.

It had been a long day. Life on the road was hard. He could barely remember what town he was in.

He stretched out on the bed and reached for the TV remote. He was pretty sure the football game was still on. But before he could switch it on, he heard a noise. It sounded like a child crying. And it sounded like it was right under the bed.

"Must be coming from downstairs," James mumbled.

But the cries got louder. Like they were coming from inside the room.

The smell of death filled the air and James suddenly felt like he wasn't alone on the bed. He rolled over and saw it. There was a baby next to him on the bed!

James stared at it in horror. What was going on here?

The baby's diaper looked like it was going to explode. "Jimmie" was written on his little shirt. There was something familiar about its face. Though James couldn't exactly place it, he felt like he had seen the baby before.

The baby kept crying.

"Can't you do something?" an old voice said from across the room. "I'm trying to sleep here."

James turned and saw that there was now an old man sitting on the chair by the window.

"What? Who are you?"

The old man got up out of the chair. He started shuffling toward the bed.

There was something familiar about him, too.

"You're in the wrong room, old man," James said, staring at his face. "Is this your grandson or something?"

"Not exactly," the old man said. "Not exactly."

"Maybe *I'm* in the wrong room," James said. "Maybe this is just a nightmar—"

Suddenly something clicked in his brain and James knew.

The pictures he had seen of himself as a baby. It was the same face. The crying baby on the bed was him. *He* was the baby.

And just as James knew that to be a fact, he was also certain about the old man. He was the old man, too. Or the old man was him. He was looking at his future and his past.

"Yeah," James said to himself. "I must be dreaming."

But when he woke up in the morning, he realized it wasn't a dream. He left his car in the parking lot—it was too small for all of them—and walked to the bus stop.

They stood there waiting. All of them. Almost 20 in all. James. The baby, Jimmie. The old man, Jim. A five-year-old James in a little plaid shirt. A middle aged James with gray hair. A high school James with terrible acne. And assorted others. There was even a fetus James from before he was born, the long umbilical cord dragging behind it on the sidewalk.

And there was a corpse James, the rotting flesh dropping from him.

They all stood there waiting for the bus.

Cookies

February 9…

It is a beautiful late February day that whispers of spring and all the things that spring brings. An almost warm breeze blows down the street.

Not much longer now, I tell myself. The snow will soon be gone.

"Excuse us, Mister?" a small voice suddenly says from behind me.

At first I ignore it. No one has ever called me mister.

"Mister?"

I stop and turn around.

There are two little girls standing there. They carry a large cardboard box that is almost bigger than they are.

"What's in the box?" I say.

"Cookies," one says. "Would you like some?"

"No, thanks," I start to say.

And then, why not? I think. I love cookies.

"Yes," I say. "Yes, I would."

I end up buying five boxes.

They are delicious.

February 12…

I am sick. Terribly sick. Something wrong with my stomach. It pours out of me from both ends. Ever since the cookies.

Thinking back, there was something strange about those girls. Shouldn't they have been wearing uniforms? And the way they smiled after they handed me those boxes. There was something not quite right in those smiles. Sinister. Almost evil.

I don't even think I paid them.

It had to be something in the cookies. I can't think of what else it could be.

I will go to the doctor if I don't improve soon.

February 13…

Terrible sounds explode out of me. Sometimes it sounds… like words.

"Too late for you. Warn the others!"

Looking at these words I can only conclude I have a raging fever and am out of my mind.

Strange then how my cheek is cold to the touch. Ice cold.

February 15…

I feel better. Much better.

It's rainy and cold but I don't care. I almost feel back to my old self.

The muddy, foul river that poured out of me has finally dried up. I am still weak, but that will pass. For the first time in days, I am hungry.

February 16…

There is a knock at the door. I look through the peephole and see the little cookie girls standing there. When I open the door, Roland is there alone. I stick my head out and look up and down the hall. Empty.

"Where'd they go?" I say.

"Where'd who go?" he says.

"Oh, never mind."

"Ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"C'mon, man. You're the one who called me and asked if I wanted to play some handball."

Handball? I don't remember calling him or saying anything about handball.

"Sorry. I must still be weak, man," I say. "I'm gonna have to pass."

"Whatever," he says, walking away.

A minute later there is another knock.

Roland is back.

"Ready?" he says.

"Didn't we just go over this?" I say.

"Go over what? What are you talking about?"

He is serious.

"Forget it," I say. "What's up?"

"Handball? You asked if I wanted to play."

Something is going on. Something weird.

February 16…

I see the little girls in a dream. They smile again the way they had that day. That's all. But something about them fills me with dread. A dread that stays with me the rest of the sleepless night.

February 17…

I finally go back to school today. I get there early. I sit in the empty classroom for a long time, wondering where everyone is. And then I realize it's Sunday.

February 20…

"Hey, why did you push Nate into the street?" Roland asks. "If that car hadn't stopped—"

"What are you talking about?"

He tells me. Reminds me, looking at me the whole time like I am crazy. Apparently I shoved Nate into the street yesterday during cross country. We were just returning to campus after a 10-miler. I don't know why I would do that.

"You had a terrible expression on your face," Roland says. "And then it was like you weren't even there."

I've never had a problem with Nate. But I don't know why Roland would lie about it either. I believe him, and yet… I have no recollection of any of it.

I can only conclude that the illness is not through with me. It's moved up, leaving my bowels and affecting, infecting my brain.

I start to sweat.

This isn't just a little lapse in memory. I'm starting to become dangerous.

Am I going mad? Maybe it wasn't the cookies. Maybe it was bad meat. I promise that if this goes any further, I will tell someone and have them put me somewhere. Somewhere where I can't hurt anyone.

February 21…

My only hope is to find those girls. I am convinced of it. They must have an antidote. They must.

February 23…

I see the little girls again tonight. They are in the corner by the closet. They are eating something. Not cookies. Blood is running down their chins. They giggle.

The room is completely dark. And yet I see them. I turn on the light and there, of course, is nothing there. I stay up the rest of the night, afraid they will return, wondering what they were eating.

They do not come back.

February 24…

I wake up from a dream as if I had stepped out of the shower. Everything is wet. I remember nothing, no details, just the words.

"Warn them! Warn them!"

February 26…

I find myself staring out the window, looking down at the students walking by. There is a twisted smile on my lips and a freshly carved jack-o-lantern in one hand and a long sharp knife in the other. I have never seen either before and do not know where they came from and what I am doing. Where a pumpkin in February came from I don't know. Nor can I tell you the thoughts behind that smile.

I am going mad. There is no other explanation. And it is not a flowers and pastel pleasant kind of madness. It is dark and dangerous. And I feel there is no coming back from it.

February 27…

I will try one thing and then I will turn myself in.

I am convinced that those girls are the cause of it all. I must find them. They are the key. Maybe I am wrong. Maybe there is still hope for me. Perhaps they know of a cure and even possess an antidote.

Yes, I will find them and everything will be better.

February 28…

I walk all the streets of this small town at least four times each. There is no sign of them.

There is no hope.

I feel the sickness growing inside me. Taking me over.

Tomorrow I will go to the hospital.

February 31… (I know that where you are there is no such date as February 31. But I no longer inhabit the place where you are.)

I have found them. I have found them! Or rather they have found me. It doesn't matter.

They are here and everything will be all right now.

I walk up to them and ask them.

"What was in those cookies?"

"Everything," the one says.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Everything is everything," she repeats.

"Everything awful, everything horrible, everything sick. All the vile things," the other one says. "They were all in there."

"But why?"

"Because it's what we do," the first one says. "Don't you have things you do?"

I ignore the question.

"Is there a cure?" I ask. "There must be a cure."

"Not really," the second one says. "Except for—"

She smiles at me and then at the other one and then they both smile at me. They bare their sharp fangs. They lunge toward me. I push them away but they rip off my left arm. They laugh. I can somehow feel the pain in my forearm as I watch them pull at the flesh with their teeth.

I stagger behind the bed, the blood leaving me. At least I know I have not imagined them. My heart pumps weakly, faintly, for the last few times and is comforted by the thought that they are real. At least that much is true. I have been forgetful and thought and done evil things, but they are the cause of it and they are real.

I can barely feel my pulse now. I can barely hold the pen I'm writing these words with. I hear them coming. I hear their heinous, girlish giggles. They are coming to finish me off. They'll come for you next.

Don't eat the cookies.

Whatever you do, don't eat the cookies. Do you hear me?

DON'T EAT THE COOKIES!

Open Window

The old man sat in front of the open window. It was his favorite place. He looked out upon the world and thought his secret thoughts.

His legs didn't work anymore. Neither could he speak or hold a pen. He was trapped inside his mind. But he had the window. It made life worth living.

One hot day in August a cold wind blew in through the open window. It slammed the bedroom door. The old man could feel the evil of it in his bones. He heard it whisper his name. The wind passed through him and he immediately felt the change.

He suddenly stood up, kicking over the wheelchair. He took one step. And then another.

He felt his tongue and throat grow strong again.

"I'm coming for you, children," he said softly.

He stopped in front of the mirror and saw the crazed expression on his face. It made his heart pound with excitement.

He walked down the hall toward the grandchildren's room.

Evil thoughts played in his mind.

"I'm coming for you, children…"

Bad Memory

Something woke George in the middle of the night.

Something was scratching at the window.

He got up slowly and stumbled toward it, almost tripping over the empty whiskey bottle on the floor.

It was his wife.

"Sarah, what are you doing out there at this time of night?" he said. "Did you forget your key?"

"I've come back, George," she said, sounding a little strange.

George wondered if he was dreaming. What was Sarah doing out there? Starting to wake up, George realized that their bedroom was on the second story and that there was no ledge outside the window. How could Sarah be stan—

"I've come back for you, George," she said, the skin falling off her face. "Now we can always be together."

George suddenly remembered that he had buried Sarah that morning. *After he had killed her.*

"I don't understand how I got there," she said. "But I was in the ground. It was dark and cold. But I found my way back, George."

She smiled as best she could through her smashed and sunken face.

"I came back for you, George."

George screamed and *ran* out the window. And fell on the hard brick patio below.

"Let's go home, George," Sarah said next to his dead body. "Let's go home."

"C'mon, stupid dog," Ed said under his breath. "C'mon."

"¡Cucho!" the little girl cried. *"¡Ven aqui. Cucho!"*

The Golden Retriever puppy was playing with a lizard in the middle of the street. A 16-wheeler was barreling down toward it. It didn't look like the truck was going to stop.

"¡Cucho!" the girl screamed.

In a flash Ed sprinted out onto the road and scooped up the little dog. Then he disappeared behind the truck and a cloud of dust.

A moment later he walked back across the street and handed the dog to the little girl.

"Gracias, señor," she said, the puppy licking the tears off her cheeks. *"Perro malo."*

"I hope you do not come to regret your kind *jester*," the old gas station attendant said later as Ed finished stocking the vending machine with sodas from his van.

"What do you mean?" Ed said.

"*El Sediento*, the Thirsty One, he no like dogs," the old man said. "And he become most *rabioso*, very angry, when people stop the killing."

"What killing?" Ed asked.

The old man explained that *El Sediento* was the ghost of a man who had lived in the village more than a hundred years earlier. One day the man was bitten by a dog with rabies. The man died a few weeks later.

"*Muy loco* in the end, he cry the saliva from his mouth and scream about the water," the old man said. "He very thirsty but also he very *afred* of *agua*, the water. After *El Sediento*, he die, all the dogs of the town begin to die as well. This village no have no dogs for 100 years now."

"That's one crazy story," Ed said.

"Is no a story, *mi amigo*," the man said. "As a child I saw *El Sediento* with my very two eyes. He kill my dog."

On the drive back toward the Texas border, Ed thought about his own dog, Cornelius, waiting for him back home. Then he heard something coming from the back of the van.

"Por favor, agua," a voice called. *"Agua, por favor. ¡El agua noooo!"*

Ed was afraid to look in the rearview mirror, but he looked anyway.

There, behind some soda cases, was a small man with a poncho and a tattered sombrero. Great big tears spilled from his large eyes and foam covered his mouth and chin. His hand was wrapped in a bloody bandage. At first the man's expression was one of terrible suffering and terror, but then he looked right at Ed. Baring his teeth, he began to growl. His black eyes shone with a mad, evil hatred that filled the inside of the van.

The man did not speak again. He just kept growling and staring at Ed. He floated closer and closer to the driver's seat.

A loud horn got Ed's attention just in time. He had drifted over into the oncoming lane. He swerved, narrowly avoiding a crash.

When he looked back in the mirror again, the man was gone.

"That's nonsense right there," Ed said in a shaky voice as he rolled down the window. "Power of suggestion is all that is."

He took several deep breaths and began to calm down.

"That old man was pulling my leg. *El Sediento*, really? C'mon, Ed."

By the time he fell asleep that night, Ed had pretty much forgotten the whole thing. But at some point he had a terrible nightmare.

"Por favor, agua," a voice whispered in agony. *"Agua, por favor. ¡El agua noooo!"*

The man in the poncho was sitting at the foot of the bed, his back toward Ed. He slowly turned around. Drooling, he again stared at Ed with those eyes, those black, horrible, hate-filled eyes. He pointed at Ed with his bloody hand. And then he began to float over the bed, coming closer and closer and clo—

"Aaaah!"

Ed screamed in the dark till he realized it was just a dream. He turned on the light. There was nothing there. He heard the rain pounding on the roof. He grabbed the glass of water from his nightstand and took a long drink.

In the morning Cornelius woke Ed. He was licking the foot of the bed in the spot where *El Sediento* had been in the nightmare.

"What's gotten into you, fool dog?" Ed said.

He reached down to pet the animal's head and then felt the bed. It was wet with a thick, sick-smelling foamy lather.

"Eewh, what the hell?" Ed said.

He got up, had some coffee, and changed into his running clothes.

"Let's go, Corn Dog," he called as he headed out the door.

Cornelius led the way as they ran down the desert trail.

Ed was tired but glad it was the morning. The sun was shining. He was looking forward to a new day and to putting the silliness of *El Sediento* behind him.

But as they rounded a bend through a steep section of large rocks, Cornelius stopped dead and began to whimper.

Ed stopped too and looked down at the terrified dog.

"There's nothing th—"

He suddenly felt the hairs on the back of his neck and arms stand up.

When he looked up, he saw it floating there above the trail.

El Sediento.

He pointed at Ed with his bloody hand. The eyes were blacker than ever and spilled over with malevolent venom. Ed took a step back. But it was too late. A moment later a big boulder above him loosened. There was no time to get out of the way. Ed and the dog were crushed to death.

*"Por favor, agua. Agua, por favor. ¡El agu—**AAAH!"***

***

Rabies kills more than 50,000 people a year, mostly in Asia and Africa. One of its symptoms is hydrophobia, in which a thirsty patient develops a fear of water because he cannot swallow as his throat muscles slowly become paralyzed.

Old Relic Head

A small package arrived in the mailbox.

"Look," Mary said. "It's from your brother."

Jerome hadn't heard from his brother in a long time. He was an archeologist and had disappeared at a ruin somewhere in Thailand more than 10 years earlier.

"I thought he was dead," Jerome said.

"He might still be," Mary whispered. "The postmark is stamped *1998*."

The package had been mailed at the end of the last century.

Jerome drove them home and pulled the car into the garage. He sat behind the wheel, holding the package.

"I'll be right in," he said, waiting for his wife to go inside the house.

Then he slowly tore the brown paper wrapping and removed the tiny lid.

Inside was a small head chiseled out of stone. There was no letter. No note.

"Hmmm," Jerome said, turning the Ping Pong ball-sized head between his fingers.

It looked ancient, the work of a very primitive culture.

Jerome went in the house and placed the relic on a bookshelf near his desk. The days passed and he forgot about it.

But the head did not forget about Jerome. It watched him. And it waited.

And then one night it stopped waiting.

As Jerome stared up at the ceiling from the uncomfortably soft bed, the strange golden-haired woman called "Meh-ree" sleeping next to him, the words formed in his mind.

Must make sacrifice.

His tongue struggled to speak and when the words finally came out they were in a language he did not understand.

"Must… ma… make… sa-cri-fice," he whispered, the strange sounds thick in his throat. "Human sa-cri-fice."

A few minutes later, Jerome made his first offering.

But that would just be the beginning.

The blood still warm in his chin and hands, Jerome looked out the living room window at all the other structures filled with people.

He smiled.

And opened the front door.

Outdoor Ooohs, Part Two

Spiders, bloodthirsty beasts, river ghosts, mountain monsters, and wendigos. It's enough to make you want to stay inside. More than enough.

Spider Season
Fool's Gold
The House of Hearne
El Cucuy de la Montaña
The Old Woman

Spider Season

"I haven't seen any of 'em around the campsite," Brody said. "Just the same, make sure you shake out your sleeping bag. You don't want one of them hairy things in there with you, laying their eggs or what have you."

"Yeah," Jackson said. "I saw a lot of them on the hike up. Big ones, too. They've been eating all summer and now it's mating season for the little buggers."

Noah shivered. Goose bumps covered his arms.

"That's gross," he said. "I hope I can get to sleep now."

He went inside his tent and unzipped the sleeping bag. He gave it a good thrashing, spreading the super sweaty sock smell all around.

"There," he said, crawling inside.

It was cold, cold enough he could see his breath.

He listened to his iPod in the dark for a while and started to drift off to sleep.

Brody and Jackson were already snoring in the other tent a few feet away.

During the night, Noah had a terrible dream. Something large and hairy crawled over his face and disappeared into his ear. A moment later he heard humming. It was a very familiar tune, but he couldn't place it.

Then a strange inhuman voice spoke.

"I like you," it said. "I like you *a lot*."

Noah woke up screaming. His head felt like it was wrapped in cotton candy. He ran outside and called to his friends.

"Jackson! Brody! Brody!"

There was an odd sound coming from the other tent.

Noah went over, unzipped the door, and looked inside. Then he started screaming again. Two giant spiders were inside, each chewing on something bloody. Then Noah saw that Brody and Jackson were *missing their heads!*

Noah heard the music again. This time he recognized the song. It was *Here Comes the Bride*. At that moment, something touched his shoulder. When he turned around, he saw an enormous black spider dressed all in white. It was licking its lips. Noah fainted.

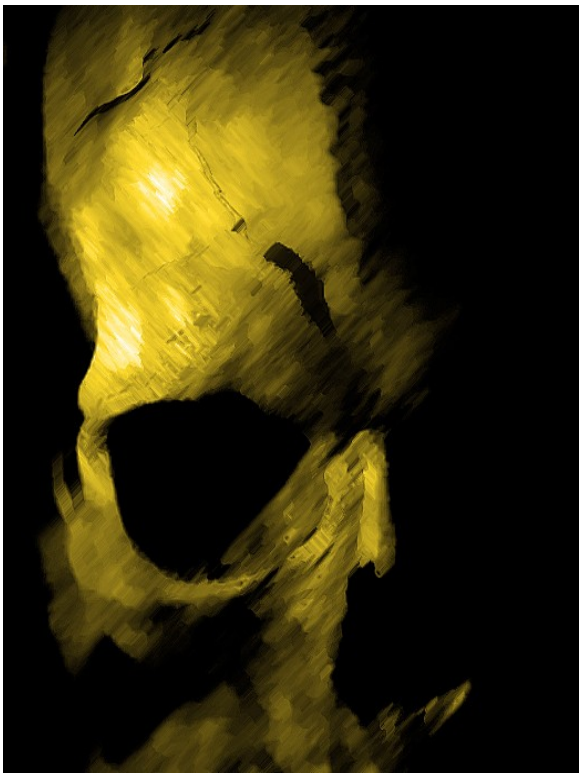
When Noah woke up the next morning, everything was fine. Outside he could hear birds chirping and Jackson and Brody as they went about their morning chores.

It had been a nightmare, just a crazy dream. Everything was fine. Everything was fine.

But one morning a few weeks after the camping trip, Noah felt strange. He sat in his chair in front of the TV and stared at the blank screen. He sat there all day. After a time his eyes clouded over and at some point he stopped moving.

Then his head fell off.

A moment later, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of spiders crawled out.



Fool's Gold

It was too cold for September, Joseph thought, staring at the flames as they shot up into the black sky. He rubbed his hands together for warmth.

"All for nut'in'," Elroy muttered, spitting on the ground.

Joseph and Elroy had been searching for gold in the Klondike wilderness for the entire summer and the only things they had to show for it were callused hands and sore backs. With autumn closing in, they knew that they had better find their fortune soon or they would be heading back home to Seattle empty-handed.

"Take it easy," Joseph said. "We're not done yet."

"Not at all like they said," Elroy said. "Only ones making any money here are those mule packers and merchants selling us the equipment."

Joseph studied his grimy hands in the fire's glow.

"Gotta just keep working," Joseph said.

Suddenly, there was a loud rustling noise in the bushes behind them. Elroy stood quickly, stumbling a little as he reached for his rifle.

"Who's there?" Joseph yelled out into the darkness.

Both men breathed hard, staring at the brush. They had heard about men being attacked and killed by huge grizzly bears out here. The rustling got louder and then something walked toward them. But it wasn't a bear. It was a boy.

The men breathed a sigh of relief. Then Elroy got mad.

"Shouldn't sneak up on people like that, fool," he shouted. "Nearly got kilt."

He set his rifle down against a rock.

The boy was about 10, with dirty clothes. Joseph figured he must be a miner's son.

"What ya doing out here?" Joseph asked.

"My pa died a while back. I been living out here ever since."

"Out here all by yourself?" Elroy said.

He nodded.

"You hungry?" Joseph said, offering a biscuit.

But the boy refused the food. He sat down by the fire.

"Well, you ain't staying with us," Elroy said. "Can't be taking care of no stupid boy. We got work to do."

But Joseph didn't see it that way.

"You stay here with us tonight, help us mine in the morning and we'll bring you into town when we're through. Somebody there will help you out."

"Thank you, sir," the boy said.

"Your pa find any gold out here?" Elroy asked, eyes half moons.

"Yessir, lots. Big nuggets too," the boy said. "Pa was always lucky like that."

"Lucky 'til he wasn't, you mean." Elroy let out a long chuckle, and downed the rest of his drink. He stood up and stretched.

"This is what we're gonna do," Elroy finally said. "Tomorrow you gonna show us where your pa's claim is at. And if what you say is true, maybe we'll keep you on for a while. You know, take care of you some."

Joseph knew that Elroy was up to no good.

“Best get to bed now, son,” Elroy said, handing him their extra blanket. “See you in the morning.”

Joseph and Elroy secured the camp for the night in case of rain. The boy fell into a quick sleep next to the fire.

“Yeehaw,” Elroy said in a low voice. Gold was dancing in his eyes. “Tomorrow the two of us gonna be rich!”

“Take it easy,” Joseph said. “Let’s just wait and see. And I think you mean the three of us.”

“I mean what I said, two of us,” Elroy said. “Don’t be a fool. We ain’t gonna keep this boy on. He’s gonna show us where this gold mine is and soon after that it will be back to the two of us. You follow?”

Joseph stared at the sleeping boy. Never had he seen such a paler face. He crawled inside the tent, both excited and troubled about the coming day.

In the morning, the fog lingered, leaving the day cold and eerie. They gathered up their gear and followed the boy.

“Elroy, let’s just take him back tonight,” Joseph whispered. He had been thinking about it all night. “We’ll take him into town and then his gold will be ours.”

“No can do,” Elroy said. A big sack of equipment hung over his shoulder. “He’ll spill his guts like he done with us and a hundred miners will be here tomorrow.”

They walked on. Joseph wasn’t sure what to do. Maybe he should try to talk some sense into Elroy. Or at least warn the boy.

“Pa liked to dig up in those rocks over there,” the boy yelled back to them, pointing to an outcrop.

Elroy smiled and rubbed the thick stubble on his chin.

“I’m gonna do this quick, partner. No sense in dragging it out.”

Joseph was torn. He didn’t want to see any harm come to the boy, but he really wanted that gold and didn’t want to share it with anybody.

“In here,” said the boy, disappearing into the mouth of a small opening. Elroy threw down his heavy load, held tight to his rifle, and motioned Joseph to stay back.

“I’ll call out when it’s all clear,” he said, winking.

Joseph stood on the thin trail alone in the wet morning, waiting. He tried to feel excited about the gold, but he felt awful and guilty.

Suddenly loud, horrible noises came from the cave. Screams and howls and grunts and groans. Awful spine-tingling, blood-splattering sounds. Some crazed beast was ripping apart Elroy and the boy.

“ELROY!” Joseph screamed, running up to the dark entrance.

He stopped, frozen in fear. The noises were louder and even more horrible. He fired a shot into the air, but it didn’t stop anything.

“Must have been a bear in there,” Joseph whispered. His mouth was dry as bone dust and his heart thumped fast and hard in his chest. After a few seconds, he backed away. “Can’t save nobody now.”

Joseph started running down the trail. He was filled with fear, but it didn’t stop his feet any. When he couldn’t hear those awful sounds anymore, he stopped for a moment to catch his breath.

What if that man-killing bear follows me? Best to wait. I can get a good shot here.

He climbed up on a rock that overlooked the path and waited. It wasn’t too long before he heard something coming.

“Dang, that was fast,” he whispered, gripping his rifle.

Sweat poured from his face. Then he saw it.

It wasn’t a bear. It was that pale, 10-year-old boy standing on the trail. Blood was dripping from his face. His shirt was ripped and stained. His eyes were huge and wild. He didn’t look like any sort of boy anymore.

The thing stood there in silence, its long, red-colored teeth glistening through the fog as he sniffed the air.

And at the very exact moment that Joseph realized that the thing was looking for him, their eyes met. The rifle smashed to the ground as the boy raced toward Joseph. Soon, more of that terrible screaming could be heard for miles and miles.

And then it was quiet again.

The House of Hearne

"All you have to do is bring back the dead bird before the sun comes up," Pete Molson said. "The map will show you where it's buried."

Murray and Freddy nodded.

"Any questions?" Pete Molson said.

"So we bring back the bird and we're members of the House of Hearne?" Murray asked eagerly.

"Yes, before the sun comes up," Pete Molson said. "We'll meet you down by the river at midnight."

Murray and Freddy went home and studied the map.

"Looks like it's about three miles to the island where the bird is buried and three miles back," Murray said. "It shouldn't be too bad."

"Do you think they killed the bird?" Freddy said.

"I don't know," Murray said. "And I don't care."

"And why do we want to join the House of Hearne again?" Freddy asked.

"'Cause there's two kinds of people in this stupid town," Murray said, starting to get mad. "House of Hearners and losers—and I don't want to be a loser, Freddy."

Freddy didn't want to be a loser, but he wasn't so sure he wanted to belong to this club either. If the House of Hearne Explorers Society was as awesome as Murray said, they should be digging for something cool like buried treasure instead of some poor dead bird, Freddy thought. But he knew how much it mattered to his older brother, so he kept his mouth shut.

As midnight approached, the boys packed a knapsack, put some pillows under the covers to make it look like they were sleeping in their beds, and slipped out the bedroom window.

It was a clear and chilly October night. Murray and Freddy walked quickly down to the river. The other boys were waiting for them.

"Here's a shovel," Pete Molson said. "Good luck and, oh, watch out for Davy."

Everyone knew the story of Davy La Boite. Davy La Boite was a boy who had drowned under the town's covered bridge almost 100 years earlier. His body was never found. Soon after the accident, the stories began to surface, each generation adding its own chapter. At some point the last name was changed to *LaBoo* and someone came up with a little nonsense rhyme: "Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe."

According to some, Davy would rise up from his watery grave if someone stood on the bridge and spoke the words backwards. Others said that his ghost would get anyone who passed under the bridge at night without repeating the rhyme three times.

It was a moonless night and it took a few minutes for Freddy's eyes to adjust to the black water out in front of him. The paddle still felt cold in his hands as they approached the covered bridge. It loomed larger and more ominous with each stroke.

"Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe. Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe," Freddy whispered under the bridge's dark shadow. "Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe."

"Don't be such a child," Murray said from the stern. "Ain't no Davy LaBoo."

Freddy paddled hard and with the help of the current they were soon through to the other side.

Suddenly a loud splash came from somewhere behind them.

“What was that?” Freddy asked nervously.

“Probably just a fish,” Murray said. “No, I mean, *I’m the ghost of Davy LaBoooooo coming to get yooooooou*.”

“Cut it out, Murray,” Freddy said.

They made good progress down the river and reached the lake. Freddy sighed with relief when he saw the small island come into view.

“There it is,” Murray said, pointing his flashlight down at the map. “The bird’s supposed to be buried somewhere in the center of this island.”

They pulled up on a gravelly beach.

“Get the shovel,” Murray said. “Looks like a black rock marks the spot.”

His flashlight cast creepy shadows as the trees closed in all around. Deeper and deeper into the woods they walked in search of the grave of the dead bird.

“There,” Freddy finally said, pointing to a rock.

“I’ll dig first,” Murray said.

The dirt was soft. Soon the shovel hit something.

“Point the light down here,” Murray said getting down on his knees.

He dug at the dirt with his hands and pulled out an old, wooden box. He removed the lid.

“That’s sick,” Freddy said, looking down at the dead bird. It was a big black crow. Its eyes were open and bulging and seemed to be looking right at them. Goose bumps covered Freddy’s arms.

Murray closed the lid and stood up.

“Let’s get going,” he said.

They walked quickly through the forest to the canoe. Murray carefully placed the box down under his seat. They paddled silently back across the lake. Soon they were back on the river. The bridge was up ahead.

All they had to do was get past this bridge and they were home free, Freddy thought. But he had a bad feeling. Dread, like hands closing in around his neck, began to choke him.

“Isn’t there another way we can get back?” he said in a shaky voice.

“You know there’s not,” Murray said. “Suck it up, girlfriend.”

“Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe. Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe,” Freddy said again under the bridge. “Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe.”

“I told you there ain’t no—” Murray said.

Freddy heard a loud splash behind the boat. A second later, the canoe rocked violently.

“Stop messing around, Murray,” Freddy shouted. “You’re gonna flip us.”

Murray didn’t answer.

“Murray? Murray!”

Suddenly a gruesome odor filled Freddy’s nostrils. He turned around slowly. What he saw would stay with him for the rest of his life. There in the back of the canoe, a green-black mass of hair, bone, and rotting flesh stood over Murray. An eerie glow escaping from its empty eye sockets, the thing just stood there dripping with evil.

“Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe. Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe,” Freddy repeated, shutting his eyes tight. “Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe.”

When he looked back again, the ghost of Davy LaBoo had wrapped its limbs around Murray. A moment later they both went over the side and disappeared. Bubbles rose to the surface. At

first, Freddy thought he could hear screaming and hideous laughter coming from under the black water. And then everything was quiet again, like nothing had ever happened.

Freddy made it home that night and lived to be a very old man, telling the story to anyone who would listen. Murray was never seen a—**GAAAIN!**

El Cucuy
de la Montaña

"I would not go that way if I were you," Victor said.

"This is the way, Vicky. I told you, I've been here before," Angel said, looking past the snow at the trail on the other side.

Stalling, Victor drank slowly from his water bottle. It was dusty and hot, even for July, on the steep path that led to the summit of Mt. Demonico. But it was not quite hot enough to melt this patch of snow.

Veronica, Victor's sister, had driven them to the trailhead and would pick them up after her shift ended.

"I'll see you two little twerps later," she said. "Don't let *El Cucuy de la Montaña* get you—and don't be late."

"Your sister is fine," Angel said after Veronica drove away, playing with his make-believe TV Zorro mustache. "But I don't care for her calling me no twerp and treating us like we was children with that trash talk about some Boogie Man of the Mountain. *Por favor*."

Victor smiled. He knew a lot of people believed those stories about *El Cucuy de la Montaña*. And he knew Angel wasn't one of those people.

"Man, it drops a long way if we slip," Victor said now, looking at the rocky precipice. It was hundreds of feet down, maybe even a thousand. "The scavengers are gonna have one sweet dead man's party on what's left of us."

"You always show up with that fear of yours. Everywhere we go," Angel said. "C'mon now, girl, this is the way."

Victor tried to stretch out the break by talking.

"You know my uncle said he saw *El Cucuy de la Montaña* up here once when he was a kid," Victor said. "He said it looked just like a regular man but then it started to breathe out fog or something."

"Or something is right," Angel said. "Your uncle's been breathing in too much loco weed.

"All right. Time to do this."

Victor's stomach sank, the chocolate and peanuts mixing with the now fear-flavored nougat.

The boys walked up to the edge of the snow again.

Suddenly someone walked up behind them.

"Man, don't sneak up like that," Angel said, losing his balance a little.

The tall man had long hair and a beard and carried a walking stick. It was the kind that always made the boys laugh, selling for 50 bucks in town when you could find plenty of sticks in the woods for free.

"There's a better way up over here," he said.

Then he smiled, turned around, and walked away. Squinting in the fierce sun, Angel and Victor watched him leave.

"These *menso* tourists," Angel said.

"Look," Victor said, seeing his chance. "I'm gonna go check it out. I'll call out if I find it."

Angel looked down at the snow and the drop without saying anything. He shook his head as Victor headed off in the direction of the hiker.

"Yeah, okay," he said. "Might as well check it out, if it's faster and all."

Victor exhaled deeply as he heard Angel walking behind him.

The boys followed the man at a distance to where the trail veered upwards. They both realized instantly that here was the real trail.

"Hey, don't you think it's strange that he wasn't carrying a pack or anything like that?" Angel said.

"Yeah, not even water," Victor said. "Man, I'd be thirsty."

"Maybe his people are at the top and they have his stuff."

The stranger was already far ahead of them. Right before he disappeared from view, Victor thought he could see the man's breath.

Must be cold up there, he thought.

The rest of the hike was easy. Soon the two boys threw up their arms on the summit in celebration as if they had conquered Everest.

"Wow, this is awesome!" Victor said.

Angel agreed, meeting his friend's fist with his own.

They stood there for a few moments, taking in the top-of-the-world feeling and all the sights. What they didn't see was the stranger. Somehow he wasn't at the top.

"Weird, man," Victor said. "Where would he go? It's like he just vanished."

"Yeah," Angel said. "Weirder than your mom's tamales."

Victor was about to start laughing. But then he saw the stranger suddenly appear behind Angel. The man's eyes burned red through the frosty fog that escaped from his mouth.

Before Victor could warn his friend, the man picked Angel by the shoulders and threw him off the side of the mountain.

"¡Esta es mi montaña!" the man said. "This is my mountain, fools!"

As it came toward Victor, *El Cucuy*—or whatever it was—seemed to create its own weather. The sun disappeared and the temperature dropped like one of those rocks trailing behind poor Angel.

Victor started running down the path as fast as he could.

It felt more and more like November with every freezing step he took. The rocks under his feet were beginning to feel slippery, but he knew he couldn't afford to slow down. That thing was probably coming after him.

As he rounded a switchback, Victor saw the creature out of the corner of his eye. It was covered in snow and ice. Victor screamed.

"*Dios, por favor*," he said. "Help me."

A moment later he lost his balance and fell, hitting his head on a rock. Everything went black.

When Victor came to, it was dark. The sun had gone down and it was freezing. Angel was lying next to him.

"Angel?" Victor whispered, shaking his friend. "Angel."

Angel was cold and stiff.

He must be dead, Victor thought.

An otherworldly cold closed in all around. Suddenly, it was the dead of winter. Victor began to shake uncontrollably. When he looked down, he saw that he was completely encased in ice. He struggled to move, but all he could do was shiver.

Before his eyeballs froze over, Victor saw *El Cucuy de la Montaña* coming toward him.

"I will feed on him first," it growled, staring at Angel with those demon-red eyes. "And then I will come for you, *menso*. And then I will come for you…"

AAAH!

The Old Woman

Many years ago now, when I was a little boy, my grandfather he say to me this story.

Long before the railroad and the automobile and the jet plane, there was the canoe and the voyageurs. Transporting the beaver fur from the vast Canadian wilderness through dangerous rivers, windy lakes, and hungry mosquitoes was the work of the men of the north. My grandfather was one such man.

On this particular trip coming back down the river Churchill heavy with beaver skins, a new paddler he joined my grandfather's crew. Now Julien LeCoq he put his back into the long day of paddling and portaging and portaging and paddling. And the boss he say Julien LeCoq could run the rapids that would make other men go *poo poo* in their *pantalon*.

Still, the other men did not like Julien LeCoq. There was something about him, though what it was for sure *mon grand pere*, my grandfather, he could not say. Perhaps it was that he paddled silently, not singing like the other men. Or se possible it was the way he was always looking around with large, nervous eyes, like he was waiting for something to happen.

Nobody had ever seen eyes like the eyes of Julien LeCoq.

As the voyage she go on, Julien LeCoq began to act more and more bizarre. He stopped sleeping and began talking about *la vieille femme*, the old woman. Always *la vieille femme*.

"The old woman" was the name the voyageurs gave to the wind. You see, the wind she is the great enemy of the man who travels by canoe.

[Make wind sounds.]

One night Julien LeCoq began to whisper, "*La vieille femme vient pour moi. Le mort vient pour moi.* The old woman she is coming for me. Death she is coming for me."

And the next day Julien LeCoq he began to croon.

"La vieille femme vient pour moi! Le mort vient pour moi!" he sang in a high, shaky voice as he paddled. "The old woman she is coming for me. Death she is coming for me."

[Make wind sounds.]

The trip and Julien they continue in this fashion for many days and nights with the sleepless obsession of la vieille femme.

Finalement, finally you would say, one night the group is on a little island at the end of a huge lake and the wind she begin to blow with great anger. The lake was a terrible ocean of waves. It was useless to try and make the fire. The men they were happy to have a break from the mosquito and the black fly, but they were no so happy to have no hot food.

[Make wind sounds.]

One of the men, trying only to have a little fun, he say to Julien, "The old woman she is blowing tonight, no, Julien? The big lake is quite angry. Heh, heh, heh."

But Julien, his eyes all *rouge*—how you say? Red—he fail to see the humor and threw himself on the man, screaming *"La vieille femme vient pour moi! Le mort vient pour moi!"*

He would have killed that man if the others had not pulled him off.

My grandfather he did his best to calm down the poor fellow. He say to him, *"C'est seulement le vent, Julien*. It is only the wind."

But it was no use. Julien LeCoq he pulled away and ran into the woods behind the camp, screaming as he went.

"La vieille femme vient pour moi! Le mort vient pour moi! The old woman she is coming for meeeeee..."

And then his tortured voice it disappeared into the black night and the crying of the old woman.

[Make wind sounds.]

The next morning the wind she is gone and Julien he no return. The other men say, "Yoohoo, Julien? Where are you? Where are you hiding to? Yoohoo, Julien?"

Julien still he had to be on the little island. But after searching and searching, they could not find him.

And so the voyage she go on without Julien LeCoq.

The voyageurs paddled all day to cross the giant lake, not even stopping once to smoke the pipe. As they were approaching the far shore, each man thought he could hear the whispering of Julien LeCoq. It was only their imagination. That is what they say to themselves.

"La vieille femme vient pour moi. Le mort vient pour moi."

[Make wind sounds.]

And then they saw him—or what was left of him—sitting against a big rock. The unforgettable eyes staring out at the sky, staring out from the skeleton of Julien LeCoq! All that was left were those eyes still in the skull and the bones, bones burned and black as the night.

There was no sign of a campfire, and there was no explanation for how Julien LeCoq could have crossed that gigantic lake.

Though exhausted, the men paddled long into the darkness that silent night. Through all the miles and all the years after that, my grandfather he was never able to forget the song of Julien LeCoq.

"La vieille femme vient pour moi. Le mort vient pour moi."

Listen. Do you not hear?

The old woman she is dancing tonight.

[Make wind sounds.]

La vieille femme vient pour moi...

[Make wind sounds and then suddenly turn to someone and shout] *Et pour **VOUS!!!**

***

* *"Et pour vous" means "and for you."*

Holiday Horrors

Twisted takes on old holiday classics and sick new favorites to rattle your mistletoe and give your Yule log the shivers.

Frosty the Bloody Snowman
The Red-Nosed One
The Nutcracker
Fruitcake
What Would Christmas Be?

Frosty the Bloody Snowman

Frosty was gone. All that was left of the jolly snowman was a corncob pipe, a button, two lumps of coal, an old silk hat, and a sad puddle of water.

"I'll save you, Frosty," Karen said through her sobs. "I'll save you."

But first she needed something to put the melted snow in.

The hat, she thought.

Then she took off a sock and used it to soak up the water. She held it over the hat and wrung it dry. She repeated this more than a hundred times until there wasn't a single drop left.

Karen raced home and transferred the contents of the hat into a plastic water bottle. Then she labeled it *Frosty*.

"I'll bring you back to life on the first cold day," she whispered as she put the bottle in the back of the freezer. "I promise."

As it turned out that wasn't until mid-January.

"The weatherman says it's going to snow tomorrow," Karen's mom said.

"Yippie!" Karen shouted.

She went to the refrigerator and took out the water bottle. The ice inside looked dark and murky.

The next day it snowed so much they closed the schools.

Karen called her friends and asked them to help her build a snowman. When they were finished she poured the water bottle into the old silk hat and then put the hat on the snowman's head.

"Come back to me, Frosty," she whispered with her eyes closed. "Come back, Frosty."

Suddenly thunder crashed and the smell of sour milk and Munster cheese filled the air. (Not the pasteurized, American kind either.)

When Karen opened her eyes, the snowman was scratching himself. He then stared at her with hate in his eyes.

"What are you looking at?" he said. "Do I know you or something?"

"Don't you remember me, Frosty?" Karen said. "I'm Karen. I'm the one who brought you back to life, Frosty."

"Who's Frosty?" he asked. "My name's Chilblains."

The snowman then picked up a hard chunk of ice and nailed one of other kids in the eye with it. Then he kicked a dog that had been sniffing at his feet.

"Boo!" he shouted, scattering the rest of Karen's friends.

"What's wrong, Frosty?" she said.

"I told you, my name's Chilblains. I'm outta here."

"Wait. Where are you going?"

"I've got a score to settle with a certain magician."

"But, Frosty," Karen said. "Santa forgave Professor Hinkle."

"Santa and this Frosty you keep talking about can do whatever the hell they want," he said. "Chilblains doesn't forget. And he doesn't forgive."

"What about the Christmas spirit?"

“It’s January, girly,” the malevolent snowman said, his eyes glowing with evil. “Christmas is *over*.”

Karen began to cry.

“You only have yourself to blame,” he said, walking away. “Who knew the sock juice of a little girl could hold so much evil? So much putrid, reeking, stinking, delicious evil. Try washing your feet sometime.”

Then he started laughing. There was a darkness in his laughter that caused Karen to start shivering and shaking and drooling uncontrollably.

That was the last day anyone ever saw Professor Hinkle.

When the police went to his house, the only trace of the magician they found was his barbershop quartet moustache… *still attached to his upper lip*.

Frosty or Chilblains—whoever or whatever he was—had turned cannibal.

The Red-Nosed One

Rudolph had a very shiny nose.
And it was covered in blood.
Your blood.
Ahahahahahahahaaa…
AAAH!

The Nutcracker

Fritz was snoring loudly as the snow fell silently outside his window on Christmas Eve.

He suddenly awoke to the sound of the floorboards creaking.

"Who's there?" Fritz whispered.

A large shadow was standing at the foot of the bed.

"Who are you?" Fritz said, hoping it was St. Nick. "What do you want?"

"You shouldn't have broken my jaw with that walnut tonight," the shadow said.

With shaking fingers, Fritz lit the candle on his nightstand. A giant nutcracker was standing there. He had a terrible look on what was left of his face.

"Do you see what you've done?" he mumbled, holding out his bloody wooden jaw in his hands. "Now it's your turn!"

The nutcracker came closer. Fritz screamed and screamed and screamed some more. The pain was horrible. Horrible. So horrible…

In the morning Fritz reached up and felt around his face.

"Oh, good," he said in a freakishly high-pitched voice. "It was just a dream."

And then he started screaming again.

Fruitcake

The holidays had come and gone. The ornaments and lights had been put away. The tree hauled off by Boy Scouts for $5. The bottles of Christmas cheer, now sad and empty, crowded together for warmth in the dark recycle bin dreaming of another chance. The presents were all but forgotten.

And still it remained. There in the middle of the kitchen table. Untouched. Invisible? Sacred? Both? Neither?

More like nether. As in the netherworld below our feet.

Wrapped in red ribbon. How apropos. Waiting. Waiting in cellophane silence. Waiting for its chance. To corrupt. To take over my will. To cannibalize my soul. With its cherries and cranberries and walnuts. With its Scrooge-rationed flour and powdered sugar and bits of glowing green weirdness.

I feel its evil growing with each passing day. All I seek is to be rid of it. A little peace.

But it will not let me be.

Oh, fruitcake most vile, away with thee.

You laugh, of course, thinking me mad or comical, safe in your easy chair in front of the fire. By the way, is that a Snuggie you have on? If so, are you in any position to laugh? In any case, you would not do so if you were here in its presence.

I have conducted an investigation as to how it got inside the house. As with most things evil, I have to believe that someone invited it in.

And yet they deny any knowledge of it.

"Are you sure *you* didn't bring it in?" one says. "I could have sworn I saw you come home with it under your arm in early December."

"Wasn't me," says I.

They eye me strangely. As if my word is something to be doubted.

But they are the ones that cannot be trusted. I have to assume they are all under its spell.

It is up to me.

After all, I am the one who hears the voices at night. They whisper when they think I am sleeping.

But that is not all.

Lately, more and more, I hear them in my head. Sending me instructions.

One bite.

Just one bite.

And just this morning I found myself with a plate in one hand and a butter knife in the other. Sitting in front of it. I did not know how I had gotten there or what I was thinking.

The trash man comes tomorrow. I will throw it out while no one is looking. They will not miss it. And if someone should ask I will answer honestly. "Yes, it was I. I tossed it. And what of it? Who among you was going to bite into its almonds, its raisins, its candied peels and brandied prunes?"

I try to pick it up, but it holds fast as if nailed to the table. It will not budge. I strain and pull and tear fibers and muscles. I hear the bones in my back crack from the terrible strain of its diabolical weight. And finally feel it move. I wrap my fingers and hands and arms under and around it and stagger toward the trash.

I only manage a few steps and realize I'm not going to make it. Ten feet away still and my legs are finished. I toss it toward the trash can. It falls hopelessly short, smashing into the tile floor. And through it. Disappearing down, down, down. Back from where it came.

I have done it. I will deal with the damage later. For now all I can think is… I have done it!

And then smoke and fire and a ghastly smell rise up from the hole. I take a step back and then another. I am too late, too slow. It dawns on me the only thing I have done is open a portal. And then I hear the growling. A moment later a dozen fire-breathing hellhounds leap from the hole and rip me to pieces. When all that is left of me is little more than my bloodied and broken spirit, they stop and disappear back in the hole.

Then, like an infernal vacuum cleaner, a hot breeze sucks me down behind them…

My wounds have all healed as if by miracle. But there are no miracles down here. I'm chained to a table. The fruitcake is across from me. It has taken the form of a demon and forces me to eat of its candied flesh. I cannot scream. I cannot vomit. I can only chew and swallow.

Forever.

Bite after bite after bite after bite after—

AAAH!

What Would Christmas Be?

What would Christmas be without an evil clown?
Lucky for you, you'll never find out.
[Insert circus music, mad laughter, and gruesome death by evil clown here.]

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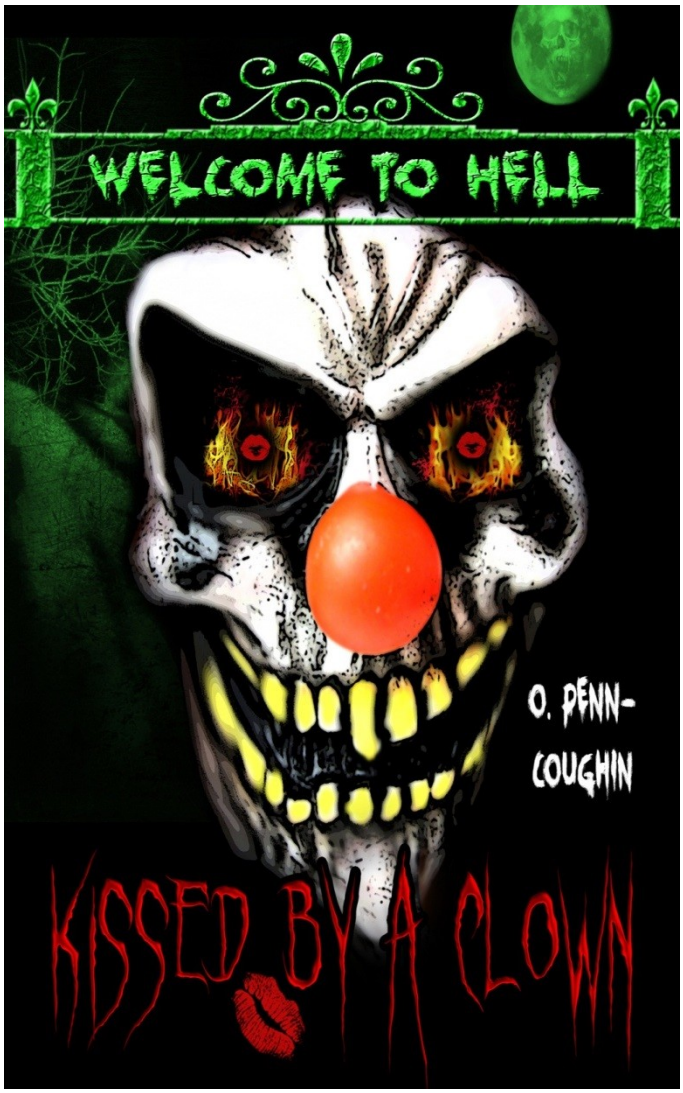
WELCOME TO HELL
O. PENN-
COUGHIN
KISSED BY A CLOWN

For the students of South Baker—
No matter how hopeless things look,
always, always fight the clowns.

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and **creeping thing**, and **beast of the earth** after his kind.” And it was so.

Genesis 1:24

Send in the clowns. Don’t bother, they’re here.

Send in the Clowns
Stephen Sondheim

Kissed by a Clown

Based on true events

Chapter 1

The circus had come to Baker City.

Even in a small town like this, out here in eastern Oregon, out here in the middle of nowhere with a capital *N*, the circus didn't cause the excitement it once did. It couldn't compete against the rodeo or high school football or PlayStation or listening to the wind blow or sucking on a nail until you could taste the rust.

Over the last few days I had seen some of the performers in different parts of town—in front of the supermarket, at gas stations, on street corners—handing out coupons. And now on this first Friday in October a van full of clowns had shown up at the school.

At first the students were glad to be out of class, and the 4th graders were all about it, but it didn't take long for boredom to spread through the crowd like runny peanut butter. A clown on a unicycle, clowns tripping over themselves, a clown juggling, a clown squirting the kids in the front row with water from his plastic lapel flower, and a mime—a mime in the 21st century?—wasn't getting it done.

"The lamest show on earth," Jason whispered loudly a few minutes into the assembly. "I mean, the circus is so over. Like more over than Peyton Manning."

The Gaston twins, apparently big Peyton Manning fans and just plain big, turned around and gave him soiled looks while pounding their fists into their meaty hands.

I didn't answer. I wasn't a fan, but I wasn't sure Peyton Manning was through yet. More importantly, I didn't like clowns.

I didn't like clowns ever since that day in the park when a clown took me into the woods.

I was four and had been playing on the slide. And then someone called my name. I looked up and saw a clown standing in the trees. He had no hair and wore a tiny party hat at an angle held on by a thin elastic band. He was smiling.

Forgetting everything my mother had ever told me, I went over to him. He reached out his big gloved hand and we walked down a dirt path through the dark forest. Then he stopped and faced me.

"Ever been kissed by a clown, Danny?" he whispered, his painted face inches from my nose. "It's to die for."

His empty eyes suddenly turned evil, bottomless and black. He had the tiniest ears I had ever seen on an adult, smaller than mine at the time, no bigger than a baby's. His breath smelled of cigarettes and alcohol. Sweat pooled under his rubber nose. The small red hairy triangle above his chin came closer and closer. I looked down at the ground but all I could see were his big floppy, mud-covered shoes. My stomach was about to lose it and my pee was putting on its running shoes.

And then my mother's yells closed in from behind.

"Danny. Where are you, Danny? Danny!"

"Adults are always spoiling things," the clown said with a sigh. "No worries, though, we'll meet again."

He let go of my hand. When I looked up again, he was gone.

I stood there, crying.

Other kids hadn't been so lucky.

A dozen children disappeared that year in Northern California. (That's why my folks ended up moving to Baker City.)

I did my best to help the police sketch artist. But I couldn't provide too many particulars. To me he was just big and scary. I didn't tell them what he said. I never told anyone.

One day a man walked in to a police station and confessed. He refused to say what he did with the bodies, which were never found, but he got the death penalty.

The clown's been dead for two years, but I still have dreams about it now and then, and whenever I see a clown, I can't help but thinking that I could have been one of those kids.

"You all right, man?" I heard Jason saying next to me. "You look like you've seen a ghost. I've always wanted to say that by the way. But really, you do look as white as Peyton Manning. You all right, Dan? Dan?"

Jason seemed to be obsessed with Peyton Manning lately but he probably had a point. I didn't feel my personal best.

"Yeah," I said after a few seconds. "I'm fine."

"Check out this freak," he said.

I looked up on stage. One of the clowns was holding the microphone. He was surrounded by the other clowns. All clowns look the same to me—I usually don't spend enough time looking at them to see details—but there was something different about this one. The freakishly small party hat sitting that way on his large white bald head. The tiny, infant-sized ears. The little red soul patch below his lower lip. And the eyes. There was something about those eyes.

He looked at me and smiled through his yellow teeth.

"Remember, kids," he said. "These tickets will get you into the circus for free when you're accompanied by a paying adult. Hope to see you there. *It's to die for*."

The vomit came up my throat.

Chapter 2

"Sloppy Joes," Jason said as we walked home, putting absolutely no effort into holding back his amusement. "Man, you nailed Rebecca Wynter in the back of the head with a steaming pile of secondhand Sloppy Joes in front of the whole school. Oh, man."

He stopped to wipe the tears from his eyes.

"She must have felt like the guy in that urban legend who gets hit by the exploding canister of biscuit dough in the back of the head," he went on. "She must have thought she was dead."

"Probably just wished she was," I said.

"I know you like her," he said. "But really, bro. Still, I suppose that's one way to get her attention. A real sick way."

He kept laughing.

I wasn't ready to join him, although my stomach did feel a little better.

But I still had that bitter vomit taste in my mouth from, well, the vomit, and from what I had done to Rebecca. I had to find a way to make it right with her. She hadn't seemed too pleased the last time I saw her walking out of the office, hair still wet, wearing an old shirt the nurse had found for her. I had to admire the dignity she had shown. A lot of other people would have cried or screamed or freaked out. But she kept it together. It made me like her even more and I promised myself that I would make it up to her. But that was going to have to wait.

First I had to wrap my head around what I had just seen and heard. Or what I thought I had just seen and heard.

Had it really happened that way?

Had I created the whole thing in my head, the result of a runaway imagination fueled by bad cafeteria food? Had the police gotten the wrong man? Or was it just coincidence? Couldn't two completely different clowns, hundreds of miles and several years apart, look alike and be able to say "It's to die for" without me losing my lunch? (Don't answer that.)

A cold breeze blew down the street and dark clouds covered the Elkhorn Mountains as I turned down my block.

"See you tonight, Sloppy Joe," Jason said.

"Not if I see you first," I said feebly.

When I walked in the house, my mom came rushing up to me.

"Are you all right?" she said, feeling my forehead.

"Word travels fast 'round these parts I reckon," I said in a western accent. "Yeah, I'm fine. More embarrassed than anything."

"Oh, that will pass," she said. "You don't seem to have a fever. That's good."

I was quiet for a moment, thinking about how she would probably raise a stink about me going over to Jason's later.

"Say, Mom, hypothetically speaking, could you ever end up liking someone who threw up on you?"

"Boy, this is serious," she said, smiling. "If you're getting all hypothetical on me. Let me see? Could I ever end up liking someone who threw up on me? That's an easy one. I like *you*, don't I?"

She then reminded me of all the times I spit up on her as a baby. (I guess I had a nasty habit of hurling on the women in my life.)

"Thanks, Mom," I said. "Oh, and can I still go over to Jason's later? It's the opening of our film festival."

"Maybe, if you promise to lay off the Cheetos."

This was the third year of our Stephen King festival. Every Friday in October we would watch a different movie based on one of his stories. When it came to scary movies, Stephen King was the Man. Some of them were beyond awesome and others not so much. But it was always a good time. Even the bad ones—and there seemed to be a lot of them—were fun just because they were so bad. We talked about stuff and drank sodas and ate too many Cheetos. At first it was just Jason and me, but there were now five regulars in our group.

We would take suggestions from the other guys, but being the founding members, Jason and I had final say on what we were going to watch. We still hadn't decided on tonight's movie.

"How's it staying down, Slop?" Jason said as he opened the door. "Oh, wait, it's not."

He started laughing again and I fake punched him in the gut.

"All right," I said. "I suppose I'm gonna have a hard time living down that little incident."

"Hard? Try impossible."

"So what's it going to be tonight?" I asked.

Jason held up the *Pet Sematary* DVD.

"How's this sound?"

"I want to play with *yeeooou*," I said, quoting the super creepy little kid in the movie.

"No fair," he said back at me.

"Hey, when are they going to release that bad boy in Blu-ray?"

"Beats me."

Gabe and Tony hadn't seen it, so it was fun to see their reaction. It still held my attention after almost 20 viewings. I didn't think about the clown once. My stomach felt fine, but I still followed Dr. Mom's orders regarding the Cheetos. I knew she would check me for orange fingers later.

"That was a good one," Tony said. "Too bad there's only four Fridays this October."

"How 'bout we include the last Saturday of the month this year, too?" Jason said.

After that was settled we took turns trying to speak with a Maine accent.

We had to stop when Gabe busted everyone up with his Cartman version.

"You know, guys," he said. "Sometimes dead is better. Ayuh."

"That was epic in school today, Dan," Eddie said a minute later. "Just epic."

Everyone started laughing again, including me.

"I guess it was," I said.

I figured this was good practice for what was waiting for me back at school on Monday.

After we stopped laughing, Tony asked what we were going to watch next week.

"How about *It*?" Gabe said.

"You're kidding, right?" Jason said. "That movie blows more chunks than Dan here. No offense, Slop."

"None taken," I said. "But see what you can do about not calling me *Slop*."

"Sure thing, Slop."

"That's what I thought."

"That clown is scary," Tony said.

"Yeah," Jason said. "He's scary for about five seconds—and then you have to sit through three more hours of pure torture."

“I hear the book is a lot better,” Eddie said.

“Does the clown turn into a giant spider in the book?” Jason said.

“I don’t know,” Eddie said. “I haven’t read it.”

“Well, if it does, you keep that book far away from me,” Jason said. “The clown turning into a giant spider sucks. Why not an ostrich or a ladybug? What were they thinking? So to answer your question, I guess, no, we won’t be watching *It* anytime soon.”

“How about *Storm of the Century* and could we please talk about something other than clowns?” I said on behalf of my stomach, which had suddenly started to feel more than a bit queasy.

“Say, speaking of clowns,” Gabe said. “Is anybody going to the circus?”

“Ah, jeez,” I said. “I’m going home. That’s where I’m going. I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

“See ya, Joe,” Jason said. “I mean, Dan.”

The cool night air felt good. I walked slowly for the first block, looking up at the star-filled sky and thinking of Rebecca in that old shirt. Then I heard someone walking behind me. Their feet made a loud sound when they hit the ground, like giant *clown* shoes slapping at the sidewalk.

SLAP.

SLAP.

SLAP.

I ran the rest of the way without looking back.

Chapter 3

It's late November. A bunch of us are watching a movie at the Eltrym, the town's lone theater. Rebecca is sitting next to me.

I don't remember what's playing. It's not important.

Rebecca whispers something in my ear.

"Ever been kissed by a clown, Danny?"

I look over at her.

It's Rebecca. Her hair, her clothes, her voice.

"What's that?" I say, thinking I must have heard wrong.

"Ever been kissed by a clown?" she repeats, louder this time, leaving no doubt.

My heart begins to pound like the drum in that old song my mom likes by Phil Collins.

Then she turns slowly. I can see her face now. But it's not her face. It's not Rebecca. It's the clown. I try to get up, but I can't move. He pulls me in, closer and closer and closer until his lips are pressing against mine. I try to scream, try to push him off. But all I can do is taste the—

"Aaah!"

I woke up screaming.

A few seconds later my dad was standing in the door frame.

"You all right, Dan?"

"Yeah," I sighed. "Bad dream, I guess."

"You want to talk about it?" he said.

"No, I'm okay."

"All right, then. Try to get some sleep. We've got the early game tomorrow."

As I stared up at the ceiling I thought about how some other parents might have blamed my nightmare on the movie I had been watching a few hours earlier. I liked how my dad didn't jump to conclusions and overreact to things. (Except when it came to soccer.) I wished at that moment he had passed that trait on to me.

But was I overreacting?

Alone, in the dark, anything seemed possible. Especially bad, terrible things. Things like evil clowns coming back to life.

I slept walked through the game the next morning, a real zombie in cleats.

"C'mon, Dan!" my dad shouted as I wasted yet another pass to me in front of the goal. "Focus!"

Things almost turned around for me on the last play of the game. The score was still 0-0. Jason, our keeper, made an awesome save and kicked the ball all the way down the field. I trapped the ball with my left foot, bringing it down as sweet as Mrs. Butterworth. Then I flicked it over the last defender's head and raced in all alone toward the goal. Time slowed and my senses came to life. I even thought I heard the small crowd drawing in its breath and the goalie's knees shaking.

I looked up one last time before shooting.

And that's when I saw him.

The clown was standing in the trees to the right of the goal. Just like that day all those years ago.

All the oxygen left my body. I fired the ball wide, closer to the corner flag than to the goal. The ref blew his whistle.

When I looked up again, the clown was gone.

As I walked slowly toward the sidelines, I saw the disappointed look on my dad's face. He stared at me and then shook his head.

"I hate to say it, man," Jason said a few minutes later. "But today you played bad enough to qualify for the U.S. men's team. Say hello to Tim Howard for me."

My only consolation was that I hadn't thrown up this time. So I had that going for me.

"You kept us in it the whole way, Jason," my dad said as we stood watching the teams warm up for the next game. "Really good game—which is more than I can say for some others around here."

Jason was the best goalie I had ever seen. Most keepers hung back by the goal line and waited nervously. Not Jason. He attacked the ball, coming out—way out sometimes—every chance he could, closing down angles, striking terror into the hearts of opposing forwards, forcing them to shoot before they were ready. Most times, they never even got off a shot. Jason just took it off their feet.

I knew Dad was going to hold a grudge over this for a while. He expected a lot out of me. Like I said, there was the easygoing way he felt about most things. And then there was the way he felt about soccer. I was cool with it. I expected a lot more out of myself, too.

"Your dad's all right, man," Jason said a few minutes later. "He gets on you because he cares. All my old man cares about is golf."

I thought about asking him if he had seen the clown when another question suddenly pushed that one aside: what if the clown was just in my head? Maybe I was losing it, cracking up. Maybe it was only a matter of time before my dad would have to find another striker because they would be measuring me for a different kind of uniform: a strait jacket. *Do you wear white?*

I bit my lip and stared off into the woods.

Chapter 4

I might have been losing touch with reality, but that didn't stop me from becoming a reality star at South Baker Upper Elementary. By Monday mine was the most famous vomit in five counties. Later Deb, my older sister, told me that even kids at the high school were talking about it. People smiled and laughed and called me Joe or Chuck or Stan (the *South Park* character who's always throwing up on his girlfriend).

"You'll come out of this stronger," my dad had said during breakfast. "Look at it as practice for middle school. And remember that if they see that it's bothering you, it will make them keep at you all the more."

"Plus, with attention spans being what they are these days," my mom said, "the next thing will come along and people will forget all about this."

"Wow, it's like you're the Justin Bieber of puking," Jason said at recess.

"C'mon, man. You know I hate that guy. I don't want to be the Justin Bieber of anything."

"Sorry, bro," he said, shaking his head. "I don't make the rules."

I had gotten to school early and raced over to Rebecca's locker. Making sure no one saw, I slipped the card into one of the vents.

It felt like I worked on it all night, but in the end the only thing I could come up with was: "I'm really sorry. I hope that someday you can forgive us. *Dan and his stomach*."

Lame, I know. I was really hoping they were right about it being the thought that counts. Because if it's the puke that counts—as I suspected it was—I was screwed.

I saw a few kids wearing circus T-shirts, just in case I needed reminding that the circus had come and gone, having made a real mess of my life, a mess of elephant turd proportions. But I was young, I told myself. I had time to pick up the pieces. Maybe by the time I turned 40.

In the meantime, I would focus on keeping my head down. I didn't look in Rebecca's direction all day, which wasn't easy. I was hoping to see a look in her eyes, some kind of sign that she had read my note and that things weren't completely, well, hopeless. But this had to be hard for her, too. Normally, you might expect people to show some sympathy for the victim of such a heinous crime. But this was 6th grade. I knew there would be no mercy for either one of us.

Three o'clock finally came around. Somehow I survived. I staggered out the door at the end of the day, woozy but still standing.

In this corner, from Baker City, Oregon, a voice announced in my head, *wearing green trunks and an even greener face, the undisputed champ of nausea, queasiness, and gastrointestinal distress … KID VOMIT.*

I flashed my title belt. The crowd went nuts.

Nuts like me.

I had a great soccer practice that afternoon. Everything I touched found the back of the net. I couldn't miss.

"Save some of those for the game," my dad said, smiling.

After practice, some of the guys got into the same argument we had been having since last year. Who was better, Messi or Ronaldo?

Tony made the mistake of picking Ronaldo.

"Yo mo crazy than Mourinho," Jason said, reaching over and pinching Tony's cheek.

"Mo crazy than Mo who?" Tony said, rubbing his face.

"You should know who that is, man," Jason said. "He's Ronaldo's coach on Real Madrid. He calls himself *The Special One.* A real loon, totally whacked, insane in the membrane."

"Well, I think *you're* insane in the membrane," Tony said. "Whatever that is."

I was surprised at how good I felt. It felt good to score, even if it was just practice, and to have the day behind me and to smile as the guys talked nonsense.

Nonsense. The word bounced around in my head. Everyone has their own nonsense. Why did my nonsense have to be so dark and serious? I needed to lighten up.

I had imagined the whole clown thing Friday afternoon. There was no other explanation. The circus clowns were real enough, but that was it. The rest was on me. And so what? I got a little worked up and carried away. And who could really blame me after what happened to me as a little kid? Everyone's entitled to lose it a little now and then. And I don't mean little amount wise, like in the amount of vomit I lost that day. That was not little. I mean little in another way.

I just needed one more piece of proof before I could get on with my life. I had to check the news to see if there were any reports of missing children.

And then it hit me that Gabe wasn't at practice. Gabe never missed practice.

I texted him on the drive home. Then I began checking the internet.

Nothing. There was a story on the circus, but nothing about missing kids.

By the time I got out of the shower, Gabe had written back.

"Didn't feel like it. (Happy face.)"

Didn't feel like it? And what was that happy face about? That didn't sound like Gabe.

Oh, well, maybe Gabe was going through his own nonsense. No big thing.

I wasn't going to lose the contents of my stomach or sleep over it.

And I didn't.

Chapter 5

Things were pretty uneventful the next few days. The jokes and vomit references slowly started dying down.

There was a full moon Tuesday night. My teacher, Ms. Myles, said that the Native Americans called it the hunter's moon or the dying moon. To me it looked like a *Salem's Lot* moon. I didn't have to use too much imagination to see the skull showing through, like in the movie when the credits started to roll. As I stared up at it, I wondered if things like that ever really happened. Could a whole town get taken over by vampires? Yeah, right.

I saw Gabe at lunch Wednesday and asked him if he was going to be at practice that afternoon.

"I don't think so," he said with a big smile. "I don't see the point."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I have to go help my teacher now," he said, grinning again.

"Hey, did you see the Barcelona game Sunday? That was a crazy goal Messi scored."

"No, didn't see it," he said, walking away.

This just didn't sound like Gabe. He was always rushing through his lunch so he could get out to the yard and play soccer. It was in his blood, like it was in mine and my dad's. Now he was going to miss back-to-back practices and help his teacher instead of playing? Weird.

Maybe he's just going through a phase, I told myself.

We had social studies in the afternoon. Ms. Myles was really into social studies.

"Most people still think the Civil War was fought to free the slaves," she said, her eyes lighting up. "But that's just not true. It was about power. It's pretty much always about power. Power and money. Which is really the same thing. Now, I'm not saying Lincoln didn't want to free the slaves. He did. And once that terrible war started he made sure that something good came out of it—the end of slavery. I'm just saying that it wasn't the cause of the war."

"Oregon State!" Logan shouted.

"C'mon, fool," Riley said. "Oregon State can't touch the Ducks."

"Please, boys," Ms. Myles said. "Not *that* Civil War."

The whole thing got me started thinking about Titus Andronicus, one of my favorite bands. Their second album was made up of songs about the real Civil War, the one Ms. Myles was talking about. It was a weird idea for punk rockers, but the music was killer.

"Why are there two *L*s in Lincoln?" Mark said.

"Did you see that *Lincoln Lawyer* movie?" Jesse said.

"That Matthew McConaughey is pretty hot for an old guy," Emily said. "I think I would let him, uh, defend me."

"I guess I would, too," Ms. Myles said. "But I object to the "old guy" reference. Why, he's younger than—. Okay, okay, let's try to focus here. Order in the court."

"I'll take an order of fries," Jesse said. "From DQ."

"DQ?" Mark said. "Child, please. What this town needs is a *Burgerville*. Now, they know fries."

Outside a few snowflakes started falling. That Titus Andronicus video for *A More Perfect Union* started playing in my head. Guitar. Guitar.

Thursday was a good day. A really good day. When I opened my locker in the morning, I found a note.

"Thanks for the card. My grandfather got me that *Gold and Ghosts* shirt. It was one of my favorites, but I'll try not to hold it against you or your stomach. *Rebecca*."

Yes.

Yes, yes, yes!

"Have you become one of those smiley types, too?" Jason said before class started. "I mean, you look happier than Josh Ritter."

"Huh?"

"You've got a giant clown smile plastered on your face," he said. "Just like a lot of people around here lately."

"I don't know what you're talking about, man. I'm just happy."

"That's what they all say," he said. "Why the glee?"

"I'll tell you about it later."

He was right. I had a real village idiot thing going on. I could feel it. I didn't care. I kept smiling.

But as the day went on, my brain slowly started to put together what Jason had said with what I was seeing. There seemed to be a lot people walking around with big smiles. Like Gabe and his teacher, Mr. Stanton, and the lunch lady and the Gaston twins and a few kids in my class and more than a few fourth graders.

Good for them, I thought. *Good for them.*

Nothing wrong with being happy. Nothing at all.

On the walk home, I told Jason about Rebecca's note.

"Hey, man. Maybe it was destiny," he said. "Did you ever think of that? Maybe you were destined to lose your cookies all over her that day. Maybe the puke was the catalyst that has set something beautiful in motion."

"Where do you get this stuff, man?" I said. "Here all I'm trying to do is figure out her shirt size and you're over there with your white coat in your lab coming up with scientific theories that weave together vomit and destiny."

"I'm just saying."

"Hey, Mom," I said when I got home. "I need to buy Rebecca a T-shirt, but I don't know her size."

"It's a tricky thing buying clothes for women," she said. "If it's too large or too small, feelings are hurt, and you can end up doing more harm than good. I would guess she's a medium, though. That's your best bet. If it goes wrong, you can blame it on me."

"Thanks, Mom."

I looked for it at the downtown shops near my house first. Then I rode my bike down Campbell Street. I was at the end of the line, and fresh out of stores, when I walked into the visitors' center at the edge of town. I had never been inside. The little gift shop section could have fit inside a medium size bathroom and kind of smelled like one. But there it was. A big stack of *GOLD AND GHOSTS ALONG THE BYWAY* shirts.

I didn't know if the woman behind the counter was smiling at me or just in general. It didn't matter. I smiled back.

Good for her. Good for me.
Nothing wrong with being happy. Nothing at all.

Chapter 6

I've thought of a new drill for you, Dan," my dad said Friday morning.

"What's that?"

"Your left foot is pretty solid, but your right is still a little weak. So here's the plan: when you're playing at school, you shoot with your right foot only," he said, sounding excited. "Right foot only. It will be hard at first, but I bet you that in a few weeks you'll start to see a big difference. It'll give you a tremendous advantage over most players."

"Sounds good," I said.

"You know, even some of the world's best player's struggle with their off foot," he went on. "Like you, Messi tends to go to his left most of the time. We'll study it when we watch Barcelona play on Saturday."

I dream of clowns. My dad dreams of soccer. My mom dreams of traveling. My sister dreams of—I don't know. Makeup, I guess.

I put the brown paper bag containing the T-shirt on Rebecca's desk. I didn't want it to attract too much attention. I just put her name on the sack. No note. She would know who it was from.

I sat down and waited for her to come in.

"What's this?" she said softly a few minutes later as she looked in the bag.

Then I saw her smile. She looked over at me. I tried to keep my inner village idiot in check and nodded a slight Mona Lisa smile in her general direction. I hoped it didn't come across as a bobble head move.

Nothing wrong with being happy. Nothing at all. Bobble. Bobble.

It was cool outside. From my seat I could see the house across the street with its usual epic graveyard decorations on the front lawn. Inside, the heater cranked out a warm smoky sleeping gas, sucking out all the oxygen in the room. It smelled like someone was burning chicken feathers.

Ms. Myles had a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. on the whiteboard: "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

I was having trouble focusing on the words.

"What do you think Dr. King meant?" Ms. Myles asked.

"I think he was saying you should stand and give your seat on the bus to an old person," Logan said.

"You can't stand on the school bus, fool," Riley said. "And there ain't no old people on it anyway."

"There are different kinds of buses," Logan said. "Like the ones that take old people to the store."

"You're mental, man," Riley said.

"Maybe he was saying that it's more important what you do when the game is tied or when you're losing than what you do when your team is winning by a big score and the game's out of reach," Jason said.

"I think I know what you're trying to say," Ms. Myles said. "That's good, Jason."

“That’s good, Jason,” I mouthed at him mockingly.

“Or think about peace and war,” she said. “Everyone loves peace during peace time. But maybe it’s during war time, when it’s not so popular, that people really need to embrace peace. I think it would be very interesting to see what would happen if we changed the rules of war. What if someone couldn’t be a soldier until they turned 65? For one thing, I bet we would have a lot fewer wars.”

Old people fighting. That was kind of funny. I was interested in what Ms. Myles was saying, but the heat was making me sleepy.

Soon the only thing keeping me awake was my minty green Barcelona road jersey, the one that looked like medical scrubs. Every time my eyelids got heavy, the jolt of looking down and seeing that mind-blowing, monkey dung color brought me back like a woozy boxer getting a sniff of smelling salts.

And yet, at some point, I found myself drifting. And dribbling…

I was going around the other players like they were those little orange cones. A deathly hush fell over the home crowd. The whole stadium sensed what was coming. Looking for blood, Marcelo’s cleats came flying at me from the side. I jumped over them. One more defender to beat. *The measure of a man…* The measure of a ball. I knew that the diameter of a soccer ball was approximately 22.6 centimeters. I instantly estimated the distance between Sergio Ramos’s feet at a tick under a quarter of a meter. Just enough room. I nutmegged it beautifully through the opening between his legs and blew past him, meeting back up with the ball near the goal. I faked left, winked at someone up in the crowd, left Iker Casillas grasping at my shadow, and pushed the ball with my right foot ever so gently into the back of the net.

“Goooooooooooooooal!”

Dani Alves was the first one to run up and hug me. Messi was there a second later. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Mourinho screaming at one of his assistants.

“You guys know a good restaurant in this town?” I said, waving at Rebecca.

“Shakira and I like *El Amparo*,” Pique said. “Quite romantic.”

“*El cochinillo asado* at *Sobrino de Botín* is crazy good,” Carles Puyol said, a crazy look in his eye, his crazy hair dancing crazily in the wind. “That roasted pig is a supreme work of art.”

The public address announcer brought me back.

“Paging Dr. Snoozen. Paging Dr. U.B. Snoozen…”

It was Jason.

“Was it the one against Real Madrid again, where you school Sergio Ramos?”

I nodded, holding out the *FCB* badge on my jersey.

“That’s always a good one,” he whispered.

“The best.”

Chapter 7

We had to start early with our movie that night because *Storm of the Century* is four hours long and my folks wanted me home by 10. It was one of my favorites. I had even named our cat Andre Linoge, after the main character.

Gabe and Tony didn't show up.

"Tony said he wouldn't be here," Eddie said. "When I asked him why, he just smiled."

"Maybe they're watching *It* together," Jason, said laughing. "Get *It*?"

"I don't know," I said. "Gabe seems to be out lately. I think he's given up soccer, too."

"There's definitely some weirding stones afoot," Jason said. "Get it, a *foot*?"

"Yeah, we get it," I said. "Now let's get watching."

"No, seriously," he said, getting serious. "What's with all those people smiling all the time? It's beyond weird. It's crossed over into Lady Gaga territory. I mean, it's Scary City out there."

"Pass the Cheetos," I said.

"What would you have done?" Eddie said four hours later. "If you say *no*, he kills everyone on the island and if you say *yes*, you're giving him—"

"Yeah, it's a real tough one," Jason said, his yawn drowning out the end of what Eddie was saying. "Sometimes there's no easy answer. It's like trying to stop Peyton Manning. If you blitz, he'll dump it off and bleed you to death with short little passes and if you sit back and wait, he'll pick you apart. Choose your poison. It's the same thing with Linoge. I'm talking about the old Peyton Manning, of course, because these days Peyton Manning is—"

"We know, we know," I said. "'Peyton Manning is so over.'"

"Couldn't have said it better myself, Dan," he said, smiling. "Couldn't have said it better myself."

"You know he's hurt, right?" I said. "Don't you think it's a little unfair to kick him when he's down and all? I mean, why not U2 is so over or Fernando Torres is so over?"

"No doubt the U2 wind chime machine has been over for like forever, and I hope it's not true about Fernando Torres. Personally I think he's still got a lot of goals left in him," Jason said. "But Peyton is so much fun, man. Watching that little pout he gets when he loses. It's priceless. I kid because I love. I wish him a full and speedy recovery. I love to watch him lose. Football just wouldn't be the same without him. I'm gonna really miss that guy."

"Whatever," I said.

"Dan, come on in here a minute," my mom said from our office the next morning. "Listen to the way Bowie's voice cracks when he says "nothing" here on *Heroes*. Can you feel the passion?"

She was listening to her old records again.

"Yeah, cool," I said.

"But that's not what I wanted to tell you. I went ahead and did it. I got your father his—our—Christmas present. Two tickets to Barcelona for February. I would have gone back to Florence personally, but you know how he loves Barcelona. So this way, he can go to some games and I'll still have plenty of museums to visit."

"Wow, now that's cool."

"Yeah, it kinda is, huh?" she said, smiling. "Okay, not a word."

"Got it," I said. "My lips are sealed."

"Our lips are sealed," she began singing while doing a weird little dance around the room.

I guessed it was another one of those old songs she liked.

Our game that week was against the first place team.

On the drive over my dad gave me one of his pep talks.

"This is a good team you're playing today," he said. "But right now anything's possible. It's like that magical time right before the World Cup begins. You can dream crazy, impossible things and no one can tell you that they won't come true. You can dream that your team can win it all. But you can only whisper about it for fear that it will disappear like the fog burning off in the sun."

And then he finished by whispering, "Make the magic, Dan. Be the dream."

"You missed a good one last night," I said to Tony during warm-ups.

"That's okay," he said, a large, odd smile covering his face. "That's okay."

There was no feeling behind the words. It didn't fit the smile.

"Whatever."

"Like in practice," my dad said in our pregame huddle. "Just like in practice."

We played a good first half but it ended scoreless.

The second half was a different story. The roof caved in. For the other team.

We ran away with it, 5-0. I had a hat trick and an assist, including a header and a goal with my right foot.

"Just like in practice," my dad said after the game. "You guys can do magic when you focus."

Jason and I hung around afterwards, not wanting the feeling to end.

I thought about how fast things can change. It had only been a week since I had seen the clown. Or thought I had seen the clown. But it now felt like nothing more than an old, forgotten dream. Or like when someone asks if you remember something and you say, "No, not really." And you mean it.

Just another dead leaf carried away on a windy autumn day.

Chapter 8

My dad was right about Messi. He kept going to his left. The defenders knew where he was going to go, but they still couldn't stop him. Playing almost on one leg, he still scored two goals.

"Imagine if he worked on his right foot a little more," my dad said. "He would be better than Maradona and Pele put together. As it is, he's the best player in the world. And Jason's right. Anyone who thinks he's not *is* crazier than Mourinho."

To celebrate a great soccer weekend, my mom made paella, a rice and seafood dish from Spain. I thought it was cool how the clams opened up in the heat.

"Gross," Deb said. "You would."

"Maybe some anchovies next time," my dad said.

"You two are beyond sick," she said.

By Monday the vomit jokes had just about dried up. Only a few of the slowest kids still thought it was funny. I saw Rebecca walking down the hall wearing the *Gold and Ghosts* T-shirt. I smiled.

But I wasn't alone.

More and more people seemed to have come down with a serious case of the *happies*. It was impossible not to notice them. I guessed that about a quarter of the school was "infected." I knew that was a strange word to use, but it fit. It was like a flu going around that made people tired and lifeless, with eyes to match, and left them with a large, creepy smile that didn't seem to connect to anything they were feeling. In fact, they didn't seem to be feeling much of anything.

"I'm sick of this sh—" Jason said, slamming his locker.

"Easy there, Hoss," I said.

"No, man, something's going on," he said, his voice shaky. "This morning my dad put his golf clubs up for sale. And when I asked him if he was getting new ones, he smiled at me like all these freaks around here and said he was giving it up. My dad, giving up golf, Dan. That's nuts. He lives for golf."

"Are you guys having financial problems? There's a lot of that going around these days, too. Maybe he's just trying to find a way to save money."

"No, that's not it," Jason said. "Just last week he was saying how well his business was going."

"It kind of reminds me of Gabe," I said. "The way he doesn't play soccer anymore. Maybe it's got something to do with the changing of the seasons."

"The changing of the seasons?" he said, raising his voice. "The changing of the seasons! People are turning into smiling zombie freaks, giving up the things they love, and you're saying it's because of the changing of the seasons? That's weak, man. Get serious."

"You're right," I said. "I don't know what I was thinking. What do you think it could be?"

"I don't know, man, but whatever it is, I think it started with the circus."

"The circus? I don't understand."

"I don't understand it either," Jason said. "But this smiling epidemic started last week, just after the circus was here. I guess it could be a coincidence. But every time I look at these twisted ear-to-ear smiles, it reminds me of a clown."

I don't know why I hadn't seen it, given my history. But now that Jason pointed it out, I couldn't help feeling like I was surrounded by clowns. Dozens and dozens of them. As the goose bumps shot up my arms, I suddenly found it hard to breathe.

"Ms. Myles, haven't you noticed all these people smiling?" Emily said in class that afternoon.

"Yeah," Mark said. "Why is everyone smiling like a *retard?*"

He said the last word with a French accent.

"Now, Mark," Ms. Myles said. "You know I don't like that word."

"No, but just look around," Emily went on. "Tony, Heather, Megan, Will, Tyrone. They just sit there and smile all day long."

"Yeah," Britney said. "I thought Dan was one of them, too. But I think he's just *in love*. Look, he's not smiling now."

Everyone except for the kids Emily had mentioned turned to look at me.

"Oooh," Logan said. "Burn."

And it did.

Stay cool, I told myself. *Stay cool.* But my will wilted in the suffocating, scorching heat of her words faster than a vampire on the sunny side of Mercury. I felt my face grow hotter than a pizza when you bite into it too soon and it burns the roof off your mouth. I could almost feel the cheese melting up, up, up into my brain. The room started to spin. *Kid Vomit* was about to go down for the count.

My last thought was for Rebecca. I hoped her name wouldn't be dragged into the conversation. I knew Britney didn't like her. But I was hoping that shredding me to pieces with her claws would satisfy her appetite for now.

"Back, hater… back, rumormonger… back, ugly witch," I heard Jason say through the ringing in my ears. "Your epic vat of vileness can't touch Dan the Man."

Jason was the real man. Wounded as he was, he still had my back. I vowed that should I live through this, I would help him find out what was going on.

"Maybe they're just happy," Ms. Myles said, trying to regain control of the situation. "You know they say people in small towns are happier than those in big cities. I know it's like that for me. A day doesn't go by when I'm not grateful that I live here. And, besides, who are we to question happiness?"

But as I felt the blood slowly leaving my ears, I thought that that was exactly what we needed to start doing.

Chapter 9

Things got stranger when I got home. Someone I almost didn't recognize was sitting on the couch.

It was Deb. She was staring off into space. Her face looked younger. At first I couldn't figure out what was different about her and then it hit me: she wasn't wearing any makeup. I couldn't remember what her face really looked like. It must have been years since I had seen it last. But now the makeup was gone. The raccoon black around the eyes, the fake-looking, uneven orange tan paint, the shiny lip stuff. All gone.

And in its place was a giant grin.

Deb's boyfriend came over that night.

"Hey, Dano," he said. "How's the Regurgitator?"

"The what?" I said. "Oh, yeah. Good one, guy. Deb, Frank's here!"

Deb came down the stairs slowly, wearing her big smile.

"Hey, you look different," Frank said. "Did you do something to your hair?"

It's her face, you idiot. Get yourself some glasses.

"Can you put the trash out, Dan?" Mom said a few minutes later.

"Frank already left," I said.

"Daniel Sebastian Rodgers," she said, a tone of serious disapproval in her voice. "You behave yourself, young man."

Then she started to laugh.

The clam shells from the paella and the used cat litter fought for my attention. I held my breath as I pushed the trash can out toward the curb.

I stopped when I saw them.

I had been wrong. Frank was still there in the driveway. He was leaning back against his car. Deb had her arms around his neck. She said something I couldn't hear. Then she leaned in to kiss him.

I was about to turn around and deal with the trash later, when I suddenly heard something I would never forget. The sound was coming from Deb. As she covered Frank's mouth with hers, she let out a terrible high-pitched shriek that sounded like a thousand bats screaming.

Frank tried to push her off, but she seemed to be too strong. Then he started shaking and convulsing like he was going to die.

After Deb was finished, Frank coughed two or three times and appeared to be fine, back to normal, like nothing had happened.

But then I saw his face under the streetlight.

He was smiling, smiling from ear to ear. He had the same sick smile as Deb and the rest of the zombies.

Shivering in the dark, I stumbled back to the house.

I heard that horrible shriek in my sleep. Smiles filled my dreams. Deb, Frank, Gabe, Tony, the kids from class. They were all there. And the clown was there, whispering in my ear.

"Ever been kissed by a clown, Danny? Ever been kissed by a clown, kissed by a clown, kissed by a clown, kissed by a clown…"

Chapter 10

"That's a crazy story, man," Jason said as we walked to school. "You're telling me that one minute your smiling sister's kissing her boyfriend and the next he's turned into one of these, these *things*?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm saying. It spreads through kissing."

As I heard myself say the words, though, it all sounded completely insane, like I had been reading too much R.L. Stine or watching really bad Stephen King—*The Langoliers* and the hedge animals coming to life in the TV version of *The Shining* came to mind—and it had all rotted my brain from the inside out.

"I've been looking for you guys," Eddie said, running up to us at recess. "I saw something weird last night."

"Take a number, man," Jason said.

"Remember those clowns that were here a few weeks ago? Remember the one in charge, the head clown?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Jason said. "What about him?"

"That clown's living across the street from me."

"What?" I said. "What do you mean that clown's living across the street from you?"

"He moved into that old house that was for rent."

"When?" Jason asked.

"I don't know. I saw him there last night. And he was still dressed like a clown."

I jumped when the recess bell sounded.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Jason said to me.

"There's got to be a connection," I said.

"A connection to what?" Eddie said.

"Got to be," Jason said.

We couldn't go to the cops yet. We had no proof.

Officer, I saw my sister kiss her boyfriend and it made him smile. Officer, a scary clown just moved in across the street. And it's no coincidence. Don't you see?

That wasn't going to get it done. Right now all we had was my word about what I had seen. It was enough for Jason, but other people were going to need proof. Real proof.

During lunch I told Eddie about Deb.

"You're saying the smiling is passed along by kissing?" he said. "I don't know, Dan. That's hard to believe."

"Believe what you want," I said. "Just don't let any of those smiling things kiss you. Don't find yourself alone with them, don't go to the bathroom here at school by yourself, and make sure to lock your room at night."

"We need to find out what the clown's part in this is," Jason said. "Most def he's behind this."

"Can we come over after school?" I asked Eddie. "We can spy on him from your house."

"Most def," he said. "Sounds like fun."

Most def Eddie didn't know what he was talking about.

We watched the house from Eddie's room for several hours, but nothing happened. The clown didn't make an appearance and the house was dark. It still looked like no one lived in it.

"Are you sure you saw him?" I finally said.

"Positive, man."

"How do you know he moved in and wasn't just looking at the house or visiting someone else?"

"Because Old Man Matson told my dad we have a new neighbor," Eddie said. "Called him one of 'them circus fellas.' If he says it's true, it's true."

Eddie had a point. Old Man Matson knew everybody's business. Most times even before they did. He reminded me of *Weasel* from *Salem's Lot*.

"Hey, maybe tomorrow we can go to the newspaper and see if they know anything," Jason said.

"That's a good idea," I said.

"What are we going to watch Friday night?" Eddie said.

"How about *Salem's Lot*?" Jason said.

"I was thinking the same thing," I said. "The original?"

"You know it, homie."

We struck our fists together.

The remake was pretty good and we watched it some years, but it couldn't touch the first one.

When I got home I checked the internet to see if there were reports of smiling breakouts in other parts of the country. I couldn't find any. I didn't see any posts on Twitter about it either, except for a few from people I knew here in town.

Whatever was going on seemed to be confined to Baker City.

The *clowned*, as Jason started calling them, kept multiplying. By Wednesday it seemed like one out of every three people at school had been turned.

I was torn about Rebecca. Part of me wanted to warn her. But when I thought about what I would tell her, when I rehearsed the words in my head, it all sounded way too crazy. In her eyes, I was still a fountain of vomit. I didn't want to come across as a geyser of insanity, too.

We needed more proof. And we needed it soon. The way things were going, the whole town would be infected before the end of the month. Before Halloween.

Chapter 11

Jason and I stopped at the Baker City *Herald* office after school.

"How can I help you boys?" the man behind the counter said.

"We'd like some information," I said.

"Fire away."

"Have you noticed people acting weird lately?" Jason said. "Smiling a lot, walking around like zombies?"

"Weird? Zombies?" the man repeated. "Sounds like someone's been watching too many Halloween movies. But now that you mention it, the folks at the chamber of commerce are working on a plan to change the town's welcome sign. They want it to read, 'Baker City: The Smiliest Place on Earth.'"

"Smiliest?" Jason said. "Is that even a word?"

"Don't you think that's kind of strange?" I said.

"I stopped thinking anything them government folks do is strange a long time ago," the man said. "Now I've got to get back to checking tomorrow's classifieds. You two stay out of trouble, ya hear? And watch out for those—what did you call them?—zombies."

We stepped back outside. A chilly wind rattled the Halloween decorations that lined Main Street. Dark clouds hung over the mountains. It looked like a storm was blowing in.

"That was helpful," I said as we turned onto Eddie's street.

"Yeah, about as productive as Peyton Manning pretending to change the play at the line," Jason said. "12-42-12-42-clown-shoes-clown-shoes-big-red-floppy-floppy-set-hut-hut—"

He dropped back like he was going to pass an imaginary football, but then he stopped suddenly and brought his hands down by his side. He was staring at something down the street. I looked up and saw it, too.

The clown was coming toward us.

I could have sworn that a second before there hadn't been anyone on the sidewalk, but the clown was now almost on top of us. There was no time to hide. We just stood there as he walked right up to us.

"Howdy, gents," he said, handing us each a flyer. "Fine day for a walk."

I lost the feeling in my legs. I was four all over again. My mind ran down the street screaming: *It's him! It's him! It's him!*

"You look so familiar," he said, looking right at me with those dead black eyes and scratching his red soul patch with long yellow fingernails. "Oh, yes, it was that unfortunate incident with the Sloppy Joe's, wasn't it? What a shame. All that fine mystery meat gone to waste."

He winked and smiled, showing off his crooked mustard-colored teeth with large dark gaps in between. Then he starting laughing, his whole body rocking back and forth.

"Well, *ciao* for now. But only for now."

A moment later he was halfway down the block. I tried to read the flyer but my hands were shaking too badly.

"Smiles the Clown, available for parties and all your special occasions," Jason said. "Sure to leave them smiling."

He had just been messing with me when he said I looked familiar. Sure he was referring to our recent school encounter, but there was something more. We knew each other long before

then. I knew he remembered me from that day in the park all those years ago. I sure as hell remembered him. I had no more doubts now. No questioning my sanity or blaming my imagination.

I couldn't stop shaking.

It was him. He was real. And he was here in Baker City.

Somehow—as impossible as it seemed—Smiles the Clown had come back from the dead.

[End of sample. Download the entire book anywhere ebooks are sold.]

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